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Stuart
N.B.





HOLLY AND PIZEN

1



“‘I WONDER EF DAT COULD BE DE SAME OLE STAR!’”

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HOLLY AND PIZEN

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

RUTH McENERY STUART

Author of "Sonny," "Moriah's Mourning," "In
Simpkinsville," "A Golden Wedding," etc.



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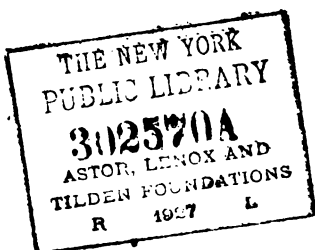
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A
LOVING TRIBUTE
IN HER OLD AGE
TO
MY MOTHER

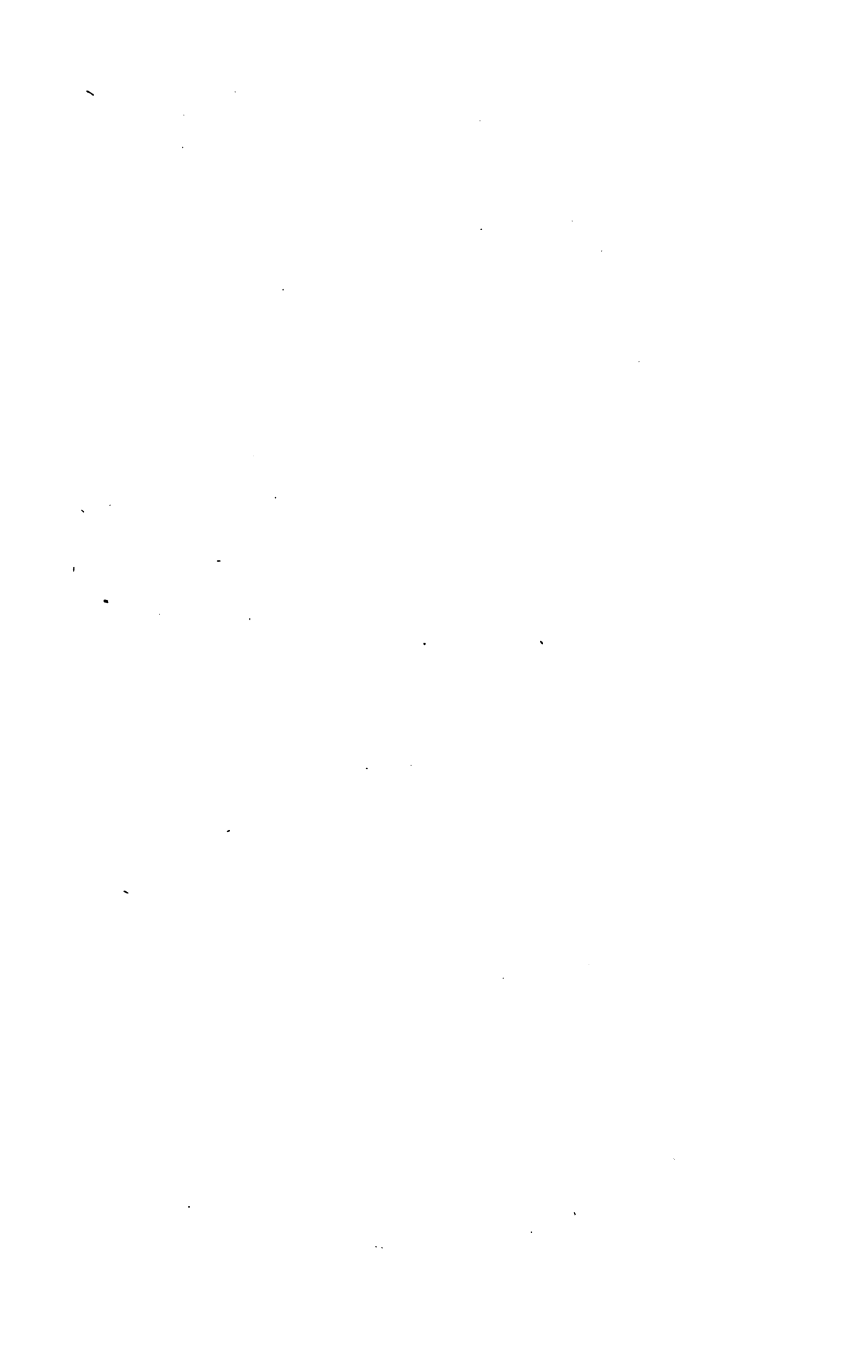
WHOSE UNSELFISH LIFE, WHOSE TRUST IN
GOD, WHOSE STUBBORN FAITH IN HUMANITY,
AND WHOSE UNCOMPROMISING INTEGRITY
HAVE EVER BEEN MY WONDER, MY INSPI-
RATION, MY DESPAIR, AND MY STANDARD



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HOLLY AND PIZEN

11

HOLLY AND PIZEN

 NCLE 'RIAH WASHINGTON was a healer of diseases on the plantation, and although he practised his profession without degree or license, the people believed in him; and the fact that he "did n't know B from a bull's foot" was rather in his favor with his unlettered constituency.

It is something, surely, to receive one's authority directly from on high, without the inadequate and oftentimes unfaithful medium of books. So they thought, and so assented Uncle 'Riah; "for," he argued, "who knows whether all deze heah book-writers is got de divine license or not, an' ain't jes a-makin' up as dey go along? Dey say de devil don't want no better tool 'n a pen to work wid, nohow—jes git some po' fool-human simple enough to sign what he choose to signify."

This was a brave defense, but it only voiced the faith of his simple followers.

Of course 'Riah had never hung out a sign, nor had he been known to present bills for services. Even had he been inclined to reduce his benefactions to terms of money, and able to cast them in the ordinary offensive form, the offended parties would have needed interpreters to discover the extent of their injuries. 'Riah did not even call himself a doctor, and although the "chimbly end" of his one-roomed cabin was a sort of home-made pharmacy, redolent of the fragrant herbs that dried in bunches about his mantel or were brewing in the numerous tomato-cans that dotted his hearth, he seldom administered physic to a patient. His system of medicine was his own, and it seems to have been this:

Seeing disease with his mind's eyes within the body of a sufferer, he "opened the doors of his own life to it," inviting it in, and leaving the patient to go on his way rejoicing. This, he explained, he could not have dared but for the fact that, when God had given him "the eye of insight," he had also bestowed a body of exceptional "robustiousness."

It is one thing to take a disease, and quit

another for a disease to take you, or, to borrow his own figure, "hit's all right to take bo'a'ders, jes so you don't let 'em keep house."

When he had once received a disease into his own body, there to await elimination by the ordinary processes of medicine and sanitation, he held it as a thing apart,—at arm's-length, so to speak,—and no matter how many of these guests there might happen to be living, or dying, in his hospitable frame, there was never for a moment a question as to who was master. Neither was there a difference between charity-patients and others, in this regard. It is only fair to say, however, that most of his were not charity-patients—that is, not in any offensive sense.

When there was much sickness on the bayou, 'Riah was usually a groaning, limping embodiment of assorted ills, many of which would seem to have been essentially incompatible, as, for instance, a chill and a fever, both of which he did not hesitate to declare raging within him at the same time. Of course they were of "different sets," as he expressed it,—that is to say, no chill came the same time with its own particular fever,—but this did not prevent the crossing of separate attacks, and although it may at

first appear that such a combination would be disastrous, the reverse seems to have been the case, and the old man would suffer only to the degree that Tom's chill was harder than Dick's fever, or the reverse; and, indeed, there were times when they so nearly balanced that he would not have known "when they het up or cooled off" but for the brief periods of heat or chill at the beginning and the end. As he said himself, "dey can't no mo' 'n cancellize so fur as dey laps," and, of course, they rarely struck at precisely the same moment. Manifestly Uriah's periods of greatest affliction were those of his finest triumphs, as for every ill he endured there was presumably a prisoner of pain set free.

In such a system as this it was particularly essential that there should be living witnesses to attest its efficacy. Nor were they wanting. For example, when he sat within his front door with his swollen leg wrapped in flannels and raised to a chair for support, and declared with groans that he was "sufferin' wid Aunt Salina Sue's milk-leg," and everybody knew that the hitherto limping Salina had the week before actually thrown her baby into a neighbor's lap and danced at her own wedding—

Well, seeing is believing.

It was but natural that the ailment in question should have been somewhat exaggerated in the transfer, and for several reasons. In the first place, it was one that could hardly have been indigenous, and any exotic takes time to adjust itself to new conditions. In this instance, too, the difficulties of readjustment were no doubt further heightened by the fact that it was grafted on to a case of dropsy that Uriah had taken from the Baptist minister. And even back of this were further complications, for, as he would have told you himself, he was already "sufferin' wid information o' de lungs an' pleurisy o' de breath" before he relieved the Baptist man, and for some of these affections he was constrained to employ remedies distinctly at war with the milk-leg.

The doctor who could exhibit half a dozen diseases in his own body at the same time, and combat them without confusion by the employment of such simples as he culled from the wood, seems to have merited all the respect he enjoyed, and, indeed, there were some who, knowing the old man's poverty, felt that he was inadequately paid for a life so freely shared with his fellow-man.

Indeed, there seems to have been no limit to his generosity in assuming pain, for did he not once even intercept a case of fever *on its way* to a neighboring well-digger, taking it thus in all its malignity, wholly unspent, and incurring a six weeks' case which nearly got the better of him, according to the reports of such as saw him in its toils. There is no reason to doubt this statement, and, indeed, the only man who had the temerity to do so was even the ungrateful neighbor whose very immunity made good the claim of the vicarious sufferer. This was, of all his cases, the one that put the old man's robustiousness to the severest test; but although he came out of it gray about the lips and with trembling hands, his invincible spirit was in no wise disturbed. Even before he had been able to rise from his bed, he had assumed the "seven years' shortness of breath" of the man who sat up with him, and taken the wasp-sting from yellow Frances's cow after it had "traveled round in her circulation" all day, the only thing he required of her being to cover the stung spot with mud compounded of earth and tobacco-juice, "to keep de pizen f'om gittin' into de milk."

It did not get into the milk, and this late in-

terception was considered almost as wonderful as his cure of Slim Sam's little Sam of lockjaw. The junior Sam had always been subject to spells of unconsciousness when things went wrong with him, and these generally set them right; but after a time he felt himself losing ground, when he recovered his sway through the lockjaw development.

On the occasion in question, the little fellow professed to have trodden on a thorn; but of this some were skeptical until Uriah, after sitting in stiff-jawed silence for nine days, drew the thorn from the sole of his own foot, and not until it lay in his trembling palm was his speech restored. This story, thorn and all, was vouched for by seven witnesses, two of whom, at least, would not exaggerate, and all the seven agreed furthermore that the thorn was blunted in the point and twice bent.

Of course there were some who, in spite of everything, refused to believe in the old man Uriah; but we find skeptics even in matters of religion. We are all skeptical of some things—a terrible fact to realize. Uriah's followers were all of his own race—that is, all excepting one family of poor whites who lived beyond the palmetto marsh, in the bot-

tom-lands; but the Suttons were clay-eaters, and had n't blood enough in their bodies to disbelieve anything. It is certainly true that when Sutton's wife had what Uriah diagnosed as "scoldin' hysterics an' mor'bun' appetites," and had grown so bad that even her husband could hardly live with her, he did fetch her to the old "yarb-kyorer," and she went home quieted down and in a submissive state of mind, while 'Riah took such a spell of scolding that nothing but a basket of fresh mushrooms, gathered from Sutton's field while the dew lay on them, and brought to him daily by the ailing woman, kept the disease in check until he could "git it subjuded down an' broke up."

If it was true that prior to his treatment the lady Sutton did nothing but "set in de door an' eat dirt," as he affirmed, it is possible that the daily walk of two miles in the sun had something to do with her restoration. At any rate, there is no question of her successful treatment, for she told it herself, confessing every detail of her implied ailment excepting one. It was said that, when the old man took her tantrums, he threw knives and forks about promiscuously, and this, she protested, "if he did it, it was n't on account

of *her* hysterics, for the only knife she ever th'owed was n't to say no mo' 'n a handle, the blade bein' that wore away."

Of course, in a position so unique as that of the old man Uriah, there were trials other than those legitimately belonging to his profession. Sometimes the young men along the bayou—that is to say, the white men—thought it would be fun to tease him; but they were generally worsted in the encounters, for although he was of lowly mind and a bearer of ills galore, Uriah was a wielder of two-edged words on provocation, and of personal fear he had no knowledge. Indeed, he had no need of it, really; for there was something in his age and isolation that established relations that were kindly, even though they were slight, between him and such of the better class as passed his door, and nearly all the small coins that crossed his old palm were their gratuities. But without these trifling benefactions, which were indeed too insignificant to be taken into account at all excepting as an indication of feeling, there was no danger of the old healer's ever being in want so long as he had a patient.

A fundamental thought in Uriah's system was that, in case he should ever die with any

of their discarded diseases in him, they would instantly return to their original possessors. It became Salina Sue's care, therefore, to see that he was duly nourished through the slow process of treatment for her discarded lameness; and, as he generally entertained several resident ailments at the same time, and each had its guardian angel, he was blessed with a protective body-guard quite adequate to the modest needs of his simple life. There were some diseases that required warm clothing and occasionally a bit of stimulant, and while he asked outright for nothing, it was but fair to his patients to let them know the only means by which their relief might become permanent.

When he took a disease home and boarded it, he could look after it properly. While some things needed discipline, there were others, as, for instance, the morbid appetite, that required "satisfaction," and the same intelligently administered.

Of course there were times when he was unfortunate, as when he took panting Polly's palpitations the week before she was drowned, and had to struggle along with them alone until some one else brought him a similar case the needs of which about cov-

ered the ground. And, as in all relations in life, there were a few cases of forgetfulness and ingratitude. One of these, indeed, was so flagrant that Uriah, after struggling awhile with the forgotten malady, sent it flying back home, and when he was induced to assume it a second time, there was no further cause for complaint. Who would not, if he could, send his rheumatism out to board rather than entertain it in his own body?

From the fact of his isolation it may appear that the old man Uriah was by choice a hermit, yet such is by no means the truth. The fact is, he had been three times married—twice in his early life, when he was widowed, so to speak, in the best way, even though it be the saddest, and a third time, when his bereavement was less regular and was attended by circumstances which in a community of greater sensitiveness in such matters might have been embarrassing.

The mate of his maturity was fully his age, and, it does seem, ought to have known her own mind. However, after struggling for several winters with the diseases of the community as they were brought home to her, she finally grew weary, and one day she quietly walked off and left her lord alone, declaring

simply that she "had done lost her taste for him."

This was bad enough; but when it is known that she did not go alone, but was ably escorted by the bronze-colored half-Indian who left his phthisic with the deserted husband, it is hard to forgive her. Even had there been no other man in the case, it would seem that her excuse was inadequate to the crime of doubly breaking her registered vow to stand by him of her choice "in sickness and in health." Manifestly the man of always ultimate robustiousness, who entertained all manners of sicknesses, was perennially in both conditions, "in sickness *and* in health," and a more sensitive soul than she would have realized herself thus twice bound.

ABOUT a quarter of a mile from 'Riah's cabin, beyond the Cherokee hedge that marked the turn of the road, was the Bradshaw place. Here lived the brothers Teddy and Tim Bradshaw, two manly but mischievous young scamps, aged respectively about seventeen and nineteen. They had been away at school for several seasons, returning only for vacations and holidays, when they usually brought several of their schoolmates home with them;

and when they were "in town," which is to say, on the bayou, there was a general feeling in the community that there was no knowing what a day would bring forth. The old man Uriah had once been the property of a remote connection of the Bradshaw family, and though the thread was slight which thus connected him with the past régime, it was strong enough to establish relations with traditions that counted for much in his scant estate.

The Christmas eve of the year of the memorable freeze which killed nearly all the orange-trees in Louisiana was a bleak day on Cherokee Bayou. Even at the "white end," around the turn, where conditions were better, it was a day to remember, and many an old resident who never thought of such a thing as keeping a diary took out his account-book and "put it down" in marginal notes. In the negro settlement, for the first time in the history of things, the cabin doors were kept more or less closed, and the inhabitants went about wrapped in gray blankets borrowed from their beds, and were gray about their steaming lips, while they chaffed one another in the road. There were Christmas preparations going on in most of the cabins to-day, and from more than one emanated the

odor of burning feathers. There had been other times when, for prudential reasons, the Christmas turkeys had been plucked indoors and their feathers burned as they fell, even when there was nothing wrong with the mercury ; but the burning of witnesses is nothing new in Christendom.

Whether it were in the heavy odor of smoking feathers, or the sweet scent of molasses cooking itself into holiday shape, or the even more suggestive composite fragrance of frying-pan and oven, all but one of the bayou chimneys bore witness to the anticipation of the day of days.

Only in Uncle 'Riah's cabin was there nothing discernible by the olfactory sense to mark the season—and for very comfortable reasons. If the good man had “loaded up” beyond his habit with maladies just before the Christmas season, his policy seems to have been as provisional as it was kindly, for there was not a delicacy known to the Southern table—none, that is, that was in any way available—that was not assured by the crying demands of his sometimes exacting ills ; and the habit of trusting this sort of providence was so strong that he did not even speculate, while he sat alone in the gathering twilight, as to what the season would bring.

It is even possible that he had worn the edge off the enjoyment of such delicacies as calf's-foot jelly and "floating island," for instance, in his recent entertainment of the malady the guardian angel of which was the famous cook, Salina Sue.

But none of these things was on the old healer's mind to-day. Indeed, he had even neglected his case of "mor'bun' appetites," as he sat at his window waiting until he was weary.

It was cold in the little cabin when the sun was low, and the old man realized it. He even turned more than once and glanced toward the pile of fire-wood,—a supply that was kept up by his consumption cases, and which there was no need of his sparing,—and he wished that some of its best logs were on the hungry coals; yet he did not move. The day had been long and disappointing. He had heard the familiar laughter of the Bradshaw boys when the carriage whizzed past his cabin at midnight the night before, and so he knew that they had come home; and he had been looking for them all day. He had even swept his cabin before the sun was up, and reddened his hearth, in anticipation of their coming.

It does not seem much to wait for, really,

all day "Christmas eve," the trivial visit of two teasing boys who had never in their lives held him in their thoughts for an hour at a time, probably; but it was all there was. It is something to "belong" to the same family as another, even when the "belonging" be as this—a variable and attenuated relation. Last things are apt to count for more than their abstract value, especially in matters of the affections.

When in the gathering darkness the narrow vista beyond the Cherokee hedge began to fade, the old man turned away with a sigh. He knew the boys would not come to-night. And yet the sigh went out in a low chuckle, as he muttered, "Reckon dey so tooken up wid Christmas, dey forgits."

He hobbled to the fire then, and after casting on the best of his pine-knots and watching them blaze and flare, he reached up to the mantel, seized the knife and plate there, uncovered a pan of food sitting in the warm ashes, and began looking after his cases. First there were those that needed strong food, then came a case to be "pampered," one the condition of which called for a moderate draught from a thick black bottle, and finally there were the lingering remains of

the "mor'bun' appetites," which were put to rest by a general picking here and there, in a sort of dilettante fashion, from the several paper sacks upon his table.

By this time the old man himself was growing sleepy; but he had no disposition to go to bed, and as he raked the coals and covered such exposed parts of his fire as were wasting heat, he talked to himself about the boys. No doubt they would rush in the first thing in the morning, and almost certainly they "would n't half behave,"—they never did,—but when they should show the first signs of "uppishness," they would have to be "taken down," as usual; but no matter: it made the coming all the sweeter that he dared reprove them. There was always a kindliness about their visits that he loved to recall even in certain situations evoking his resentment. During the vacations they had always bothered him in a thousand trivial ways. Many a time, for example, the only way he knew that they had borrowed his crawfish-net was that he had found it wet. And yet—this happened the last time they had used it, just at the end of the summer vacation—when they were so unfortunate as to tear it badly, they had tied in its meshes a little parcel

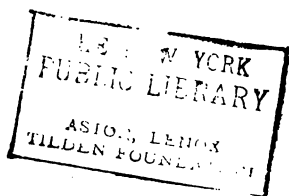
that evidently contained the best contributions of their pockets. Here were two or three bits of tobacco, four nickels, an old silk handkerchief, an odd mitten, a penknife with a single broken blade, and a box of matches. This was such a note of reparation and apology as the old man could read, and as he opened it, scolding all the while over "de rascality o' dem no-'count boys," he more than once chuckled as he wiped his eyes with the crumpled silk handkerchief. Mending the net in the autumn afternoons after the boys had gone sweetened many a lonely hour for him, and even while he looked at the setting sun and complained of the shortening days, he was glad to carry the work over.

The boys had no doubt forgotten the incident before they reached school. Indeed, their inadequate reparation had been made as much in a spirit of deviltry as anything else—a daring confession from a distance where the merited scolding could not reach them. But the old man remembered, and often, as he sat waiting to-day, he had chuckled softly as he cast his eyes up to the rafters where the mended net hung.

Bedtime came and went,—even Christmas



"MENDING THE NET IN THE AUTUMN AFTERNOONS."



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bedtime, which is not exactly an affair of the clock,—but still 'Riah nodded in his chair, and although he would start up when the wind whirled bits of branches from the trees against his roof, or the shutters rattled suddenly, it was only to drop back into a happy semi-consciousness of warmth and contentment, to which blissful state he even nodded a stupid assent again and again. So he told the fire that all was well with him, and the fire, glowing with a sense of its own comfort, smiled back as it dropped its gray lashes and fell half asleep, too.

Thus fire and man dozed for a while, when a slight noise, less than that of the wind, but different, made the man open his eyes. But the stillness within and the recurring outside disturbances were reassuring, and he nodded again, but only for a moment. Three times he was suddenly wakened before a thumping sound brought him to his feet, and he exclaimed, seeing no sign of anything wrong, "Wonder ef Skittish Kate's nightmares is a-comin' on me ag'in," and, standing alone in the half-light, he felt his own pulse, in lieu of hers. "No, dat ain't no nightmare pulse," he muttered; "hit ain't a thing but loss o' de bed. I forgits all about ole Uncle Si's weak back, settin' up heah half de night." He

turned to go to bed, but had taken only a single step when there came a timid knock at the door. Midnight though it was, he thought only of the Bradshaw boys as he strode forward to open the door.

But he was disappointed, for the figure that entered at his bidding was that of an old woman. A first glimpse was enough to awaken the professional instinct in the old host, and, as he motioned her to a chair, he said:

"Howdy, lady! Howdy, ma'am! I hope I fin' you sanitary an' salub'ious."

This was his favorite form of greeting. The visitor, who seemed to be a very old, very black woman, courtesied deeply, and, shading her eyes with her hand, drew her chair so that its back was toward the fire.

"No, sah," she began, as she sat down, and her voice was cracked and high; "I ain't to say neither sanitary nur salub'ious, an' dat 's what fetched me heah. I 'se a-sufferin' mightily wid my eyesight, an' I come to pray you to lay de hand o' healin' on me."

Her host laboriously lifted his ailing leg with both hands and placed it on the stool before him. Then he coughed and wheezed a little, and closed his eyes as if in thought.

"Yas, ma'am," he said in a minute; "I see you in half-darkness." He raised his hand and thrust it forward with a sort of groping movement. "I see you pickin' yo' way along de road an' feelin' fer de do'-latch befo' you find it—ain't dat so?"

"Yas, sah, dat's so. An' I got consider'ble in'ard mis'ry, too."

The old man kept his eyes shut, speaking as if from mental sight alone.

"Yas," he repeated, "yas; I feels yo' affliction an' I see it, too. You got consider'ble bilious bile on yo' stomick, an'—an' you got a floatin' liver same as a boat widout a rudder, an' yo' lights is all extinguished. De wonder to *me* is dat you kin see *at all*."

He opened his eyes now and looked at his patient.

"I got a lot o' cases on han' at present," he said in a moment, and his voice was quite business-like—altogether unlike the mysterious tones of the diagnostician. "Dis leg, now; de lady dat had it, she tampered wid it so long befo' I took it, it 's purty nigh wo'e me out. An' ole man Colbert's heart-disease it 's about kyored, but it 's lef' me wid a sort o' palpitation o' de sperit, an'— But ef you 'll tek good keer o' yo' case yo'se'f—eat a-plenty

fresh aigs an' cream, an' drink a little good wine, an' poultice de back o' yo' head good wid three-times-sifted-meal poultice two degrees below de simmerin'-p'int, an'—"

He would have gone on, but she interrupted him.

"Hold on, please, sir," she began; "hold on! How you 'spec' me to git a poultice an' do all you sayin', when I 'bleege' to work in de fiel'? I wants to be *kyored now*. Dat what fetched me heah, in all dis win' an' col'."

The old man cleared his throat and looked important.

"Well, lady, of co'se yo' case is got to be taken keer of, don' keer who teks it. Ef I teks it, I got to be shore it 'll have proper nour'shmint an' usage. You see, ef I 'm a-settin' in half-darkness whiles I 'm a-doctorin' it, I mus' have—"

The interview was interrupted here by a loud rap at the door, and, without waiting for an invitation, a huge fat man came in. He seemed to breathe with difficulty, and with each step he panted woefully.

Seeing him in more pain than she, the old woman rose as he entered, and offered to retire to "the other room" until he should be first served.



“ ‘ I ’ M A-SUFFERIN’ FROM A CASE O’ GENERAL SWELLIN’ . ” ”

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The newcomer moved slowly, and after a swift glance at the chairs in the room, he took from under the shawl with which he was enveloped a piece of plank, and laying it upon a stool sat upon it.

The plank was at least three feet long, but when he was seated there was little of it to spare.

"I 'm a-sufferin' from a case o' general swellin'," he began, as he fanned himself with a huge palmetto fan, "an' I come to be reduced down."

The old man regarded him askance over the rim of his spectacles.

"Well, I should say you is," he said presently—"I should say you sho is. An' what you needs is a life-size poultice, to git you reduced down *even*. 'T would n't do to reduce you down in spots, noways. You'd look wuss 'n ole man Bible-Job wid all his biles—you sho would. But huccome you fans yo'se'f so? Is you hot?"

"My insides is het up yit f'om las' summer. I 'm cool enough outside. I 'm jest a-fannin' my breath." And with this he flourished the palmetto swiftly.

"I 'spec' you feels like I does sometimes—wid two seasons ragin' in you at once-t—when

I has two chills to one fever, or, maybe, disgus' for victuals an' mor'bun' appetites bofe ragin' in me at de same time. Ef I was n't so nachelly robustious as I is, I 'd bre'k down sometimes wid all de contrarinesses I has to deal wid—"

A loud thumping sound at the door at this point, as if some one were falling against it, startled the old doctor so that he involuntarily rose to his feet. It began to seem as if strange things were happening. But his patient appeared in no wise disturbed. He continued his fanning, and did not even turn his head until a tall, slim man passed before him, bearing a pack upon his back. Then the fat man complained that the fire was oppressive, and, with more alacrity than he seemed capable of, retired to the other room. It was a common thing for his patients to wait in this other chamber—that is, behind the curtain that screened the old man's bed in the opposite end of his cabin—while another was served.

If Uriah had been a hospitable host up to this moment, his manners failed him somewhat now, for he did not like the peddler's looks. Indeed, the old negro shared the popular mistrust of peddlers in general, and

especially of such as were belated on stormy nights. For a moment he stood and looked at his third guest in embarrassed silence, even moving back a step or two as he measured him with his eye, before he found voice to say: "I—I—don't keer 'bout buyin' nothin' dis evenin', thank you, sah, an'—an' I—I *'spec' you better be a-moving on—*"

Even while he was speaking, there came a terrific gust of wind, slamming the shutters noisily, while it whistled around the mud chimney like a voice of warning. Uriah was superstitious, and in these manifestations of the infinite he felt himself challenged. He could not turn a brother man from his door on such a night as this.

"An' yit," he added, involuntarily moving back as the peddler deposited his pack upon the floor and sat upon it—"an' yit—"

Another warning came from the storm. A heavy limb fell upon the roof.

"An' yit," he hastened to say, "so long as it 's blowin' so outside—I don' know what de elemints is doin' to-night, nohow—but tell dey eases up, of co'se you 'll haf to set down—an' den I reckon you better pass on; I ain't got but one bed, an' one set o' kivers—"

Seem to me like you 'd 'a' managed to git home befo' Christmus, anyhow."

The peddler had not yet suggested remaining for the night, but at this hint, notwithstanding its breech presentation, he hastened to remark that he was n't at all particular about a bed. Indeed, he liked the idea of sitting up all night. He was a sociable man. He even proceeded to exhibit his sociable nature, as he spoke, by drawing the old man's chair quite near him and begging him to be seated, quite as if he were host of the evening. The real host, for once in his life, was evidently intimidated, and although he drew it some feet away, he took the proffered chair. Seeing him seated, the visitor remarked, reverting politely to his former suggestion:

"I would 'a' managed to git home to-night, ef I 'd 'a' had a home to go to, an' ef I was n't so forgetful. I never can ricollect where no place is, once I leave it, an' ef I had a home, I 'd likely forgit where it was—ef I did n't forgit I had it."

By this time the old negro was peering forward, scanning his guest's face. He saw that he was a white man, and eccentric-looking. His earlier guests were both colored.

"How is you talkin', anyhow?" he asked eagerly and with evident apprehension. "Ef you forgits so constant, maybe you is got a home, an' done forgot it."

The forgetful man looked straight into the fire as he replied in an even voice:

"All I can say is I disremember havin' any. I am a too honest man to claim what I can't ricollect of havin', be it either riches or relations. Ef I could ricollect any family thet might be lookin' for me to-night, I'd shoulder this pack an' start—ef I could ricollect the road. It's bad—havin' no ricollection. I'd tell you lots o' tight places it's got me in—ef I could ricollect 'em."

"'Scuse me, please, sah, but— What dis you say?" Uriah was frightened.

"I never know what I 've *said*. I only know what I 'm *sayin'*."

At this, the old man moved his chair back, and mopped his forehead. Then, recovering himself, he added:

"'Scuse me movin' back. I jes took a case o' smallpox 'istiddy, an' f'om de way I begins to feel de fire, I looks fer it to bre'k out on me any minute. Is you ever had de black smallpox?"

"I don't ricollect." It was a quiet an-

swer, but it moved Uriah back fully three feet.

"Ef I could be cured of not ricollectin'," the placid voice continued, "I'd be willin' to give all I've got in my pack—to whoever cured me."

This roused his professional instinct, and Uriah's voice was almost normal as he asked, looking askance at the object in question as he spoke:

"What is you got in yo' pack, anyhow?"

But when his prospective patient replied blandly, "I don't ricollect," he seemed to feel a sudden return of the smallpox symptoms, for he drew his chair quite to the other side of the fire.

"But I know I've *got* the pack," the peddler continued, "because I never trust no past tenses in my mind about *it*. I know the things I've *got*. It's them I've *had* I disremember. I'm always *under* my pack or *on* it. Ef I was to let go of it a minute, it would be good-by to it."

Weird as it was, the situation was interesting to the humble observer of physical and mental phenomena, and he ventured to ask tentatively:

"Has you ever los' anything so—by lettin' go of it?"

"How in thunder do I know?" This was spirited, and Uriah glanced toward the door. But the next words of his guest were reassuring in their placidity. "The only way I know I ain't got no memory is by realizin' what I have got. I 've got a absence of memory—an' that covers the ground."

"I wush-t to God A'mighty you 'd kiver de ground 'twix' heah an' wharsomever you started from." This rejoinder, although somewhat muffled, came as a fierce growl and was most uncivil, but the old man was tried beyond his strength, and his masterful nature suddenly surprised him by asserting itself.

As he spoke, there was a distinct titter from behind the curtain, and Uriah was sure he saw the peddler's shoulders shake a little.

He raised his head and looked about him, and for a moment there was something really tragic in his fear. Then a change came over his face. There had been a familiar note in that titter. It sounded like—it *was*—the laugh of the older Bradshaw boy.

The old man made no sign for nearly a minute. Then he rose to his feet, and as he began to speak, he took in the whole cabin with one comprehensive sweep of his trembling arm.

"Um—hm," he began. "Yas, I see. You-all is sick, an' you wants to know what yo' trouble is. Well, I 'll tell yer. Don't be afeard—*I 'll tell yer!* In de fust place, you 's all afflicted wid absence o' de brain, an' you 's jes nachelly a pack o' no-'count scound'els—dat what you is. Yo' heads is holler as drinkin'-gou'ds, an' as fer yo' hearts, dey 's so swunk an' swiveled up, dey ain't no bigger 'n chicken hearts. Gord forgive me fer sayin' it, but you-all is sufferin' wid a fatal case o' durn fool—de whole passel o' yer!"

The storm of his wrath seemed to break here, and, trembling still with rage, he dropped back into his chair, and while he took his poker and began vigorously to stir his fire, he muttered:

"Makin' game of a ole sick man wid de nervous p'ostration, an'—an'—

"Purty-lookin' set o' college gemmen you is, I mus' say—

"Gwine off to learn manners an'—an' ca'-yin' on sech dog-gone nonsense—"

The violence of his own speech evidently startled him, and he suddenly stopped and cast his eyes up to the ceiling.

"Yas, Lord," he exclaimed presently and with fervor, "yas; I is cussin', an' I can't he'p

it ef I is. Anybody but You 'd cuss ef—ef—ef a passel o' boys you been knowin' befo' dey was born—"

There was something suggestive of tears in the old man's distressed voice, and all at once the boys realized it, and they could be quiet no longer. When the old woman came forward, only partly free from her disguise, and 'Riah recognized in her the younger Bradshaw boy, his favorite of the two, he covered his face with his hands. The boy was full of contrition, but he hardly knew what to do or to say.

"Come on out, Teddy," he called to his brother, as he dropped his skirt and began untying the peddler's pack. "Come on, an' no more foolin'. Come, help me an' George undo this pack. We have n't got much for you here, Uncle 'Riah," he added, as he struggled with the knotted twine—"just a few Christmas things we brought you. We were going to fetch 'em to you this morning, but we began foolin', an' then, when it got late, we thought we 'd have a little lark, an' leave the things for you; but George—this is our friend Mr. George Moulton. He lives in Connecticut, an' he could n't do the plantation talk, so he took the peddler part, an'

he was so long-winded an' funny that he made us giggle—*an' then you went an' got mad.*—”

By this time the pack was open, and he lifted out a half-worn coat and laid it on the old man's lap. It was followed by two hats and a cap, several pairs of shoes, a lot of cravats, some collars and cuffs, and a number of packages.

“Why don't you tell him that mother sent the packages?” said the older brother. “Really, they are the only things that are of any account. We just put in the other things, thinking you might give them to a beggar—or something.”

'Riah was laughing by this time.

“I say beggar!” He was proudly holding the coat up before him. “I say—*I say* beggar! I gwine take out my buryin'-coat an' wear it out, an' subs'tute dis one in its place. Umh! I nuver expected to be able to be buried in a cutaway.”

Seeing him draw a purse from the coat pocket, the younger brother said, “We did n't have any money to put in that. We never have any when we come home. But I promise you a dime to-morrow, anyhow, an' maybe more.”

"And I 'll give you a dollar right now," said he who had been the peddler, "if you 'll say over again what was the matter with us boys—and I want you should say it slowly, so I can write it down."

"What dat you say? Say all dem cussin' 'jaculations over ag'in? No, sah, not ef de co't knows itse'f. I'se 'shamed enough now, cussin' out loud, an' it a-fixin' to be Christmus terreckly. You-all is sho put me to shame wid all dese Christmus gif's—an' me not got a thing fer yer." He stopped short here, as if suddenly remembering something. "Lessen I 'd give yer yo' vacation present now, an' let you save it."

He mounted his footstool as he spoke, and reaching over the old crawfish-net that lay on the rafters, he drew down a new one lying above it.

"When you yo'ng rascals busted my new fish-net las' summer, an' I had no end o' trouble a-mendin' it, I said to myse'f I war n't gwine to have my fine net snook away no mo' by a passel o' no-'count boys, so I turned to an' made y'-all dis little one."

The net was far finer and larger than his own had ever been, and the boys were ominously silent when they took it from his hands.

"I ain't got no presents to put in it," the old man continued, as he took his seat, "but I ax y'-all to forgive me fer cussin'—an' it Christmus, too. I ain't no cussin' man, no-how, but, sence I been wrastlin' wid so many sicknesses— It's good you-all did n't ketch me wid de scoldin' hysterics on me. I 'd 'a' sca'ed you all but to death."

The boys had at last thanked him many times for the net, and each in his own way—some without words—apologized for his part in the invasion; and at this reference to his professional life there was not one who did not envy him his courage as the younger Bradshaw boy said, leaning on the arm of the old man's chair in a way that was irresistible as he spoke:

"And do you mean to say that you really do take people's diseases from them, Uncle 'Riah—honest Injun, now?"

The old man was taken by surprise, but he chuckled softly as he answered quite seriously:

"I takes de 'sponsibility of 'em, honey. An' quick as anybody kin shake off de 'sponsibility of anything, it's good-by to it. I don't say I ain't wropped up a well leg an' nussed it 'fo' to-day. But dat 's kaze



“DO YOU MEAN TO SAY THAT YOU REALLY DO TAKE PEOPLE'S
DISEASES FROM THEM?”

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some folks is slow-faithed. Dey won't b'lieve nothin' widout a witness. When ole man Simpson was limpin' roun' de plantation, an' de leaders of 'is legs refused to lead, an' he had deze heah *very coa'se veins* in 'is lef' leg, I tole 'im to saw lef'-handed tell I could tek his mis'ry away; an' 't war n't no trouble. You see, sawin' lef'-handed dat th'owed 'is weight on de yether fine-vein leg, an' swapped leaders. But ef I had n't 'a' tied up my leg an' showed up de trouble in my system, you reckon he 'd 'a' supplied me wid winter socks an' coal-ile? No, sah. You see, all I gits fer my kyorin' folks is what nourishin' an' cherishin' the cases needs. Heap o' deze heah college doctors could kyore folks better 'n dey does ef dey had eyes in dey jedg-mint. I done kyored a heap o' ole puny an' peaked folks, an' started dey circulation wid nothin' but de word o' healin', 'fo' to-day—yas, I is. I jes speaks freedom fer 'em, an' when dey slow to see de light, I takes dey cases to board an' show 'em up fer 'em. Why, you could have de best pair o' lung-belluses Gord ever made, an' set down an' study about makin' 'em wheeze, an' dey 'd might soon squeak an' leak win'. I done tried it."

"And yet, Uncle 'Riah, when you were by yourself, we heard you talking about somebody's weak back."

The old man turned and looked at the boy.

"An' was you in my cabin all dat time?" He was almost fierce as he spoke.

"No, Uncle; but I was in and out several times during the evening. Don't get mad again, now. We just slipped some blankets on your bed to surprise you—some mother sent. If you don't have these diseases, what makes you talk about 'em when you are alone?"

"Well, as to dat, of co'se, I got so in de habit, I thinks in de language—dat 's all. I is got a plaster on my back now, one ole man Si fetched me, so he could feel eased a little. Settin' heah so still some days, my back gits sort o' set in de sockets, an' ef I could build up ole man Si's faith an' my back at de same time, I don't see no p'tic'lar harm in it."

"And what about your poison-pot and all of those tomato-cans, Uncle 'Riah? We 're on to you, now, and we 're not going to let you off till you tell us all about it."

"Dey ain't nothin' to tell you about dem pot an' cans, honey. An' as to de 'pizen-pot,' as dey call it, dey ain't nuver is been no pizen in it, an' I ain't nuver is said dey was. De

folks started dat on me, an' I 'lowed dat ef dey needed a pizen-pot to feed dey faith I 'd let 'em have it. So I kep' still an' looked wise. Dat 's all I done. Heap o' my color folks is dat-a-way. Ef dey did n't think I brewed pizen in de pot o' healin', dey would n't have no faith an' no fear. Pizen in docterin' is de same as de devil in 'ligion. Seem lak dey bofe needful. You can't turn yo' back on darkness widout facin' de light.

"No; de wuss I ever is done wid *pizen* was to slip a little lump o' sulphur on de live coals once-t in a while to show up de pains leavin' my body; an' dat did n't do no harm, kaze de fumes dey all mounted up de chimbly. You see, sometimes doubters comes to be healed; an' when a 'cripit ole man or 'oman comes a-limpin' in, an' I see dey jes come kaze dey don't know whar else to go, an' I mek 'em set down, an' unload some o' my pains befo' dey eyes, an' dey see me cast 'em into de flames an' de flames receive 'em, I tell yer, sometimes hit sets 'em up so dat dey 'd all but walk out straight ef dey did n't have *no* legs.

"I did fill a couple o' knot-holes in a stick o' fire-wood wid gunpowder, once-t,—jes a few light charges,—to help a nervous yaller lady outen 'er trouble. She had purty nigh

wo'e 'er ole man out wid de stampin' hysterics, an' I knowed it. An' when she come to me to be kyored, I tole 'er her case took up so much room dat I could n't accommodate it lessen I could git de fire to tek a case o' convulsion fits dat was surgin' in me. An'—well, sir, she did n't pay much attention, an' she holped me pile on de wood, me layin' de loaded log a little to one side, on top o' de wet sticks, whar it 'd git het slow; an' when I see de flames begin to warm it, I started makin' passes wid my hands, an' implorin' de fire to take de fits outen me.

“Well, sir, when de fire answered my prayer, it purty nigh ripped up de bricks on de hyearth; but *hit kyored de lady*.

“When she come to, I 'nounced dat she was healed, an' *I started stampin'*. An' wid dat she started shoutin' an' praisin' Gord. An' her ole man he say she ain't nuver is had de stampin' hysterics f'om dat time on. He humored 'em fer me wid small change an' a little liquor fer a year or so, offen an' on, an' I made him spend a little mo' money on his ole 'oman, an' let 'er set up in de rockin'-cheer whilst he worked in de field. She was one deze thin-wristed little yaller 'omans jes built fer either indulgin' or hysterics, one. An'

now de ole man he indulges her, and dey bofe think I kyored her—an' lookin' at it one way, I 'spec' I is kyored 'er.

"You see, chillun, I 'm 'feared all dis here seems mighty jubious to y'-all book-learners, but we-all is jes gropers. We walks in de half-light, an' tries to pick a straight way 'mongst a heap o' brambles.

"But, wid it all, I craves to help an' not to hender.

"But fer *pizen* in my *pot*—why, chillun, I been stirrin' it wid de holly-branch all day; an' you know I could n't use no Christmus wood in a pizen-pot. Look at all dat big bunch o' holly layin' yonder in de corner on de flo'. Yo' ma sont it in to me 'istiddy; an' she say when you-all come you 'd tack it up on de mantel-shelf fer me. She 'll be 'long in de mornin' wid 'er Testamint to read de stable story to me, de way she do every Christmus, I reckon.

"Seem lak it 's been a mighty long day to-day when y'-all did n't come."

The boys had quieted down as the old man went on, notwithstanding the times when they laughed heartily with him through the humorous passages; and when they took his hint and all three set to and began tacking

the holly-branches over his hearth, they were pretty still and serious about it; and when they had finished 'Riah said:

"No; dey ain't no 'spicion o' no pizen in none o' deze tomater-cans, chillun. It 's jes like I tole yer—to sustain de weak-faithed, dat 's all. Dey ain't no mo' 'n pennyryle in most of 'em, an' dat keeps de muskitties away; an' de fleas dey flee f'om it, too. Umh! Listen at me, matchin' my words!

"De on'ies' mission o' physic, honey, is to ketch de eye o' faith—dat 's all. I 'spec's to do away wid my tomater-cans little by little, but *don't you tell it*. I know you-all 's too much gemmen to talk behin' a' ole nigger like me, anyhow. You done complimented me enough, a-listenin' at me. But you know what time it is? Hit 's Christmus dis minute, dat what it is. Listen at de clock! Go on home now, an' 'fleet on de shepherds an' de wise men an' frankincense and myrrh an' de star in de east, an' forgit de meanderin' talk of a ole fool nigger an' de common yarbs o' Cherokee Bayou. Go on now, an' 'spress my happy Christmus an' thank-y-ma'am to yo' ma fer dem blankets. Git along, I say! I feels Sam Tyler's third-day chill a-comin' on me now, an' I gwine git it in 'twix' dem new blankets."

He had followed the boys to the door, and as they passed out, he called to them :

“Look up in de firmament todes de east, chillun ! Bless Gord, I wonder ef dat could be de same ole star !”

QUEEN O' SHEBA'S TRIUMPH



WHEN Queen o' Sheba Jackson came to New York from her plantation home at Broom Corn Bottom, she trod the plank from the Jersey ferry into Gotham like a tragedy queen, and if a little cloud, dark as her face, rising over North River, had swollen and spread before her eyes until the city about her was gray and then nearly black and then suddenly wet, she read in the incident no presage of disaster. She knew that hereabouts were the weather headquarters, and she had brought her umbrella, and the dash with which she ran it up and started forth, her Broom Corn stride in full action, fairly illustrated her spirit.

She had come against the separate and combined protestations of her family, friends, and church, who had coaxingly, prayerfully,

and at last even abusively, advised against it. It takes great spirit to brook such opposition, and Queen o' Sheba had struck out to win.

As she entered the crowd that jostled her elbows on either side, she realized in her new environment a menace to both soul and body. She had been warned that she was "li'ble to be lightning-struck wid a live wire at any street-crossin'," and she knew that evil incarnate was rampant in the great city; but she dodged the telegraph-poles, sniffed at the populace, and feared nothing.

In her pocket there were eighteen dollars in money, tied in the corner of her handkerchief, folded in with a slip of paper on which was written the year-old address of a friend who had previously migrated from Broom Corn. Sheba would have exchanged letters verifying this address, but for fear. Her fortune had come suddenly, and she dared not hold it lest it should melt. The manager of the narrow-gage road that handled Broom Corn's cotton had offered her fifty dollars for her cow, in the presence of witnesses, on the day before his train killed it on the track, and he was pleased to settle with her for transportation to New York and twenty-five dollars to boot. Five of the remaining seven

dollars of the price of her happy disaster were bulging in a wad from Sheba's stocking now—a reserve for a rainier day; and as she strode along, and the sun came out, and she began to see things in the clear light, she was pleased to remember this reserve. It gave her license as to the eighteen in her pocket.

The first thing she realized concerning herself was that her clothes were all wrong. Of course, being second-hand, they were several seasons old even in Broom Corn, but they had come from Broom Corn's best. For one brief moment, feeling the tightness of her dolman over her arms, Sheba resented New York as daring to oppose Miss Minervy Cheatham in so trivial a matter as the shape of a wrap. Miss Minervy, the judge's daughter, was a traveled person, who used languages, and who rode the fields about Broom Corn in a riding-habit, the only one extant in the vicinity, and she easily set the pace for the community in all matters of dress and etiquette. Sheba had made Miss Minervy's spring garden two years before for this wrap,—a seal plush, edged with fur,—and as she pressed through the great-sleeved throng on this first gray day, she remembered that it had come from New York and she felt be-

trayed. It is like repudiating a debt—the way some cities do. Sheba had dug and hoed and raked, and even begun to gather, for this garment, chiefly because it had been brought from New York; and when she had found herself hither bound, one of her greatest pleasures was in realizing that the wrap question, at least, was happily settled.

But the dolman had begun to go out of fashion at the first town where the train stopped, and it had grown worse at every station until she got off the cars, and now, while she trod the city of its birth, she felt it shrink into the past with every step she took. She did not care for the motley crowd on the streets, but she did dread to meet the friend upon whom she was to depend for an introduction, "lookin'," as she mentally expressed it, "like a tacky from 'way back." And so, instead of following up the address she carried, she began to watch for shop-windows, and, finally, after she had been walking for an hour or such a matter,—no great walk for a Broom Corner,—she suddenly disappeared at the door of a Sixth Avenue department-store, armed with her eighteen dollars and a mortal discontent; and when she came out, nearly an hour later, she was

radiant in the coat of the multitude, stiff, fur-trimmed, double-breasted, balloon-sleeved, and with a storm-collar that in its flamboyant flare answered her most daring spirit.

She would have bought a hat, had hats not been so dear. She had tried on several, however, and studied them to such effect that, watching her chance, she tilted her own, hind part before, on the back of her head, and the result was so gratifying that she decided to wear it so; and when she had secured it in place with a nine-cent jeweled pin, it not only answered the challenge of the storm-collar, but set the pace for even greater things. Its bows, arranged for the face, smiled promiscuous greetings on all who walked behind it, while its delighted wearer opposed them by a beaming front. When Sheba jostled the Sixth Avenue throng again a feather boa of fine presence graced her neck. She had swung it there quite as one who had habited with constrictors all her life. Of course, the storm-collar repudiated the boa as supererogatory, but Sheba could not realize this. Still, to do her justice, she had bought it as a bargain rather than as a needed factor in her toilet. It had cost but two dollars and ninety-eight cents, the odd

cents exactly expressing its recent "reduction" (from two dollars). And in this certainly no woman who knows how to shop can blame her. Have we not all done likewise ?

Sheba had her friend in mind when she stepped into the street, but the windows were fascinating—in more ways than one. Not only were they glittering allurements in their offerings, but each, when taken at a happy angle, became a mirror, and in its reflection Sheba saw what to her prejudiced eyes was the figure of a stately and finished New-Yorker. The transition had been quick, it is true, but some of us are assimilative. Seeing herself thus, it was perhaps but natural that she should have hesitated in front of a photographer's, "just to look" at the beautiful tintypes of which his glaring advertisement promised to supply three copies in five minutes, and for only twenty-five cents.

Many of the sample pictures in the showcase were of persons of her own color, which was an added attraction, and—

Well, when her pictures were finished, they fully corroborated the flattering testimony of the windows, and as she slipped them reluctantly into her pocket and started on her

way up-town, her expression was quite urbane and self-complacent.

She had asked a policeman to help her on her way, intuitively recognizing a uniform bravely worn in public as a sort of stamp of reliability.

"I don't know who you is, but you's *somebody*, an' you ain't a-hidin' it." So she had addressed the seven-foot protector of the peace, who answered her with his index-finger, and sent her flying southward in an elevated train at Fourteenth Street. How could a stranger know the difference between Ninth Avenue and Ninth Street? The fact that Queen o' Sheba Jackson did not know was important inasmuch only as it made it late in the day when, having returned disappointed from the vicinity of the Battery after a vain pursuit, she found that the number which her friend's address called for in Ninth Street was nowhere indicated. The place where it belonged was what seemed to be a pit, out of which emerged ropes and pulleys, marked in the early twilight by a red lantern. The house had been torn down.

Now, for the first time, Sheba felt frightened. The street-lamps were lighting, and every one seemed suddenly to be hurrying

home—or somewhere. She did not feel inclined to ask a policeman to direct her again. She had discovered near the Battery that these uniformed men were the police, having really witnessed one in action, and to be consigned to a lodging by such as one of them would have been too much like being in custody for her free spirit.

Her present dilemma, however, was not for long. There were plenty of colored people in the throng in Ninth Street, many of them evidently going home from work, and Sheba soon found herself in company with her kind in a stately tenement, where she easily got a bed by a small prepayment. Thus she entered upon her life in the great city.

It is no simple matter to get the best sort of position in a strange place when one has no recommendation, and so Sheba was constrained to begin by taking what even to her inexperience seemed a second-best. It afforded her a home, however, and the munificent wages of twelve dollars a month, so that she was soon able to write a letter to her people which, with the inclosed tintype, told so startling a tale of instant success that, but for the cost of the trip, many of them would have hastened to follow her. The av-

erage wages in Broom Corn was four dollars, payable generally, in part at least, in trade at one of its stores.

CITY life, as it is practised in New York, was trying to Sheba in many ways. She had been somewhat of a local celebrity as a cook at the Bottom, and her first ardor was somewhat dampened when she came to discover that her skill in making her specialties—buttermilk and beaten biscuit, for instance—counted for naught, and that her frying-pan was unavailable. The golden bread, fragrant at home with the sweetness of the Indian meal, was here a poor, sawdusty thing suggestive of the kiln, and needing to be sugared to become palatable. And there were other disappointments. Her toilets would not pass muster with people of any form whatever, and her speech would go not at all with them. When it was not too slow it was altogether too swift, which is to say that the picturesqueness of her drawl was insufficient to compensate for its acceleration under provocation. From a second-class place she was constrained to accept one of the third rate, which is a demoralizing experience. It takes but a short pedigree of such to constitute a plebeian in

the ranking of metropolitan service, and a plebe on the down grade seems to have a poor chance to alter her course. At least, so it seemed in Sheba's case. She changed situations many times during the first year, and more than once she changed against her will and suddenly. Life was hard, and there were many times when, but for her challenged pride, which alone of her attributes seems to have remained unsullied, she would have returned to her native heath, if she had had the money.

At one time she fell ill, and there were days of experience and loneliness when she missed things. Even in the hospital, where everything was immaculate, she missed the personal attention of the home doctor, whose habit it was to "lump" the servants' bills in with the yearly accounts of his white patients whom they served; and she missed the visiting sisters of the church in the doubtful days of slow convalescence and of her "setbacks." She missed space and air and freedom. Indeed, it sometimes seemed as if she were missing everything. The even beds and the serene faces of the nurses palled on her, and she pined for the home air charged with emotion. One good moan or an "Amen!" at her bed

side and a mustard-plaster that would weigh a pound—such as these were the things for which her soul hungered.

WHEN she sent the prosperous-looking tintype of herself to her home people, Sheba had no intention of misrepresenting her condition any more than she had when she refrained from mentioning her illness, and the fact that she had lain for several weeks a charity patient in a city hospital. One has a right to one's reserves, surely, and indeed the bravest of us sometimes feel that in maintaining silence we are exercising our best part.

In sending the tintype she had meant only to say, "See how fine I look in my New York toggery!" And if the picture said, instead, "Behold! I am rich, and prosperous and superior, and the ring upon my finger is a diamond, and my fur-trimmed garment represents a small fortune!" the fault was hardly hers. Even if she had anticipated its telling so exaggerated a tale, she would not have suppressed it, if for no other reason, because she would not have expected it to be believed. But when one wrote her from the plantation that another had remarked that "Queen o' Sheba Jackson need n't to think that because she's

set up in New York and can afford to sport fur coats and diamonds that she's the biggest toad in the puddle," she simply did not deny the allegation. Indeed, it is likely that the edifice of deceit that she had soon begun to build, and into which she at last moved bodily, was the direct result of home suggestion. The imputations of affluence, even negatively confessed, became interesting to her, and adversely as her fortunes declined did she build upon this foundation her castle of indolence and ease.

The city address which she gave at home, and to which her mail was sent, was the tenement where she paid twenty-five cents a month for trunk-space, with the privilege of making it a dollar a week when she was pleased—or displeased—to occupy the bed beside the trunk.

During the first year, in which she many times changed her residence, the trunk address was only twice changed, and in both instances the letters sent to Broom Corn hinted that its removal—which, of course, was ostensibly hers—was in an ascending scale.

Sheba really told very few lies outright about herself and her fortunes in these days, and

when she first found herself ostensibly writing from her own apartment, in which there were "stuffed chairs," "dumb-waiters" and "election bells" (the last needing only to be touched to produce almost any desired service), she scarcely knew how it had come about. Indeed, this deception was in the beginning only an accident. When the misleading letter was written, she was actually cooking for the family of a "floor-walker" in Fourteenth Street, and it was true that these attractive luxuries were there, as well as some elegancies which she also casually mentioned; and if she artlessly alluded to them as "ours," it was with no desire to deceive. It had been the habit of her life to ally herself thus with the white families with whom she lived.

After her illness, when Sheba came out of the hospital, she was but a shadow of her former self. She was not strong enough to stand the heat and fatigue of cooking, and after trying vainly for more attractive work, she finally found herself in the position of cook's assistant — otherwise scullion — in a Harlem boarding-house. She had presided over a better kitchen in her day, and she felt pretty blue when she first took the orders of the great Irish potentate, "Miss Bridget," and

became conscious that of all the servants there, she was the very lowest in the social order. For the first time she now fully realized that there was absolutely nothing worth while in life for her in New York, and she knew that she would never go home. With this last realization came hopelessness—hopelessness which gradually found expression in a dogged compliance.

The servants all slept in cots on the basement floor, and naturally the last comer always had to take the worst place at night, at the head of the basement stairs, where the draft from the cellar blew over her cot; and when Sheba first placed hers here she felt more lonely than she had ever felt in all her life before. It was pretty close quarters when all the cots were down, but, as Maggie the left-handed dish-breaker, once remarked, "There's fun in ut when a person gets used to ut wanst—yis, fun and company," she laughed. But Maggie was blessed with a saving sense of humor, and on her very first night, when she had accepted the cellar draft, she bravely remarked in a loud voice, as she emerged from behind the clothes-rack, where she had repaired with her rosary for prayer: "Sure, there 's no room to be lonesome in ut, ony-

way"; to which the cook's voice had replied, from under the covers in the kitchen: "Sure, an' mony 's the toime since, I 'd pay a guinea a minute, if I had ut, for a half-hour o' the lonesomeness I dthreaded comun' over."

The question of place was a matter of nightly scramble, excepting, of course, in the case of the cook, who located her claim according to her whim, and held it by prestige, backed on occasion by brawn and language. The servants made no complaint at this unavoidable crowding; and, indeed, it would have been unreasonable to do so, for did not the landlady, who would almost have tipped the scales with Bridget, sleep in the ostensible "escritory" in the little reception-room, and repair to the dish-closet for her afternoon changes of toilet?

Sheba hated the cook, and she hated the lesser maids — all but left-handed Maggie, through whose promotion she had come into her position. It is true, Maggie said the worst things to her on provocation; but, as she expressed it, Maggie "talked to her like a human," which was some comfort. It was she who put her up to securing a better place for her cot at night, and let her into the rule of the roost, which was that whoever made

down her bed and *prayed by it* fixed her claim to the chosen location for the night, all excepting, again, the cook, who weighed three hundred pounds, and said her prayers in bed—"by a dispensation," so she said. Maggie assured her, too, once when she was in one of her friendliest moods, that she did n't mind colored people since she had got used to them, and that it was a holy relief, for when she first came over she crossed herself and called on the blessed Mother every time she met one.

The laundress was colored, and so was the bell-boy, who went home at night; but they had Eastern pronunciations, and were no company whatever to Sheba. It was the laundress, however, who unwittingly brought into her life the element of hope that makes it possible to write a sketch of her which may hold so fine a word as "triumph."

WHEN, one day, a well-dressed white man called to see the laundress, Sheba could not help overhearing part of his conversation before she knew who he was, and when the woman of the tubs approached her haughtily and said that Mr. Stein wished an introduction to her, she was glad to speak with him. Mr. Stein represented the Afro-American

Funeral Insurance Company, Limited, and he had called to collect her dues from the laundress, who held a policy in his company. His desire to meet Mrs. Jackson was entirely in the character of solicitor, and if he had but known how eagerly she listened to his every word as he set forth the advantages of his corporation, he would not have felt it necessary to solicit quite so warmly. When she had lain so ill in the hospital, the prospect of an unmarked grave in potter's field had stared her in the face—a pauper's grave over in the mosquito country which she vaguely knew lay somewhere across the river. And yet, even while it seemed so near, she would have preferred it to an ignominious return home in a position where those who had most fiercely opposed her might come and stand over her and say things to her face, and she would not be able to answer them.

For a trifle paid monthly she was now offered assurance of decent burial. An added sum would guarantee a higher grade of service, with carriages and other accessories. The scale ran somewhat like this: Fifty cents, payable monthly before the third day, assured simple, silent burial, with no "grievers." This sum doubled would secure the plumed

hearse. Twenty-five cents apiece, paid quarterly, would prepay mourners,—a comfortable provision for the stranger,—while a dollar a year would cover the cost of fresh flowers. The funeral oration was offered free to such as “took up” all the other advantages. There was a neat chapel on the floor above the undertaker’s shop of the company—a chapel which might be inspected at stated times by such as wished to verify the representations of the company’s agent. Indeed, for such “doubting Thomases” there were occasional “sample funerals” given, when applicants for policies were treated without cost to an entire ceremonial, even to the ride in the carriage to the cemetery. Sheba did not know about this premium upon hesitation when she so readily decided to embrace the proffered terms, and, indeed, she was tempted to a quick decision by Mr. Stein’s kind offer to advance the money for the first payment out of his own pocket. So within an hour after she had been introduced to the scheme she had mortgaged her precarious income for a full benefit: six mourners,—the same being considered “a set,”—music, flowers, the postponed hearse and funeral oration, with a final bed of green, were now hers to contemplate.

The policy crediting her with a first payment, which she signed in the presence of the laundress and the bell-boy,—the latter didn't expect to die, and refused to insure,—was delivered to her on the third day of the month following, when she paid double dues, making good the loan.

Strange to say, the taking of the policy revived her spirit and renewed her self-respect. The fact that she must die to win counted for nothing to her. She would win, even though she died, and the end would be triumphant, no matter how much of humiliation she might have to endure in the interval. The simple fact that she really did save the money to keep her policy paid up soon began to institute within her an upward tendency. She was obliged to do without many of the baubles which it had been her habit to buy, and she was obliged to guard her temper. It became necessary that she should keep her place. The ordinary chances of life, dealing with fairly amenable material, ought out of these elements to evolve a pretty respectable woman—in time. How much time is, of course, a question of the special case. Sheba was not vicious, although she did some things which are badly catalogued in the moral code

of the best civilizations—but, if such a thing is possible, she did them innocently.

If she had been of a pious turn, no doubt the funeral insurance, with its formal presentation of death beyond contingency, would have instituted a revival of religion within her; but the fact is, she was not only not religious, but the opposition of the Broom Corn congregation had set her stanchly against the church even in her adopted home.

She had made an emotional connection with the Methodist Church when she was very young, but before she was well grown she had recklessly danced herself out of its fold, and had never resumed active membership with it, although she had generally gone to church at Broom Corn, and was enrolled as one of its straying sheep long before she had actually wandered beyond its jurisdiction.

ON a certain morning several months after she had taken her insurance policy, Queen o' Sheba waked with a start before day, and, raising herself upon her elbow, looked about her. She had scarcely slept all night, and even in the dim light of the gas turned low her face showed marks of distress. It was

evident that there was something on her mind, and that it was disturbing her sorely.

As she glanced from the clothes and shoes strewn over the floor to the faces of the sleepers, whose vociferous snorings almost deadened the sounds of the rats tumbling in the wall, a change came over her face and for a moment her eyes fairly twinkled with merriment. A sense of the ludicrous had come to her relief.

"For Gord's sake!" she chuckled. "No wonder I drempt about a boat-race." And then, fairly shaking with suppressed laughter, she added: "Name o' Gord! jes look at my cushioned cheers—an' my piany—an' my gilt sofy—an' my—"

She ducked her head suddenly under the cover, lest she should rouse the cook; for while she laughed she observed that one whistling steamer in the race had failed to come to time, and she was pretty sure it was the *Bridget*.

When she poked her head out again in a moment, however, there were only the old marks upon it, care lines and the deep-set eyes that tell of failing health and disappointment—only these, with the added shade of a new trouble.

Sheba was in trouble indeed—trouble of an altogether unexpected sort, which in its descent upon her tired mind had nearly stunned her. The blow had fallen early the morning before, and all day she had done her work in a perfunctory manner, half dazed and brooding, and when Maggie had sympathetically asked what ailed her, she had only shaken her head moodily and drawled, "Nothin' in p'tic'lar."

The thing that had really befallen her was a joyous letter from home—a letter which brought her only ostensibly "good news" from her people. Surely it ought to be good news to know that one's friends are coming!

It would have been good news to poor Sheba if things had been different.

The situation was this:

Delegates from all the societies of the various colored churches in and about Broom Corn had decided to take advantage of special rates to New York to attend a reunion, and at least half the delegates were Sheba's personal friends.

It was even likely that one or two members of her own family would make a break and come. Of course they were all delighted at the prospect of the visit, and the letter an-

nouncing their coming was the most personal and affectionate that poor Sheba had gotten since she had left home.

This added to her pain in the matter, if anything could have made it worse after the simple fact had reached her. Really the letter frightened her so that she trembled, and she had not quite realized its contents until she had sat and read it carefully again and again, "studyin' over it" between readings until it was all plain.

She had not the slightest idea what to do. Her first impulse was to run. She could easily take her trunk, leaving no new address behind it at the old place; but this would invite disaster as certainly as holding her ground. This last, however, she could not contemplate. The fact is, she had no ground to hold. If she could not allow her friends to go to the address through which she had received her letters, and to discover her fraud, neither could she invite them to visit her in the basement where she had during the day only right of way between the sink and the window where she peeled potatoes, and debatable cot-space at night.

No wonder she was troubled as she lay thinking the matter over in the early morn-

ing hours. Who that has suffered—which is to say, who that has lived—does not know this tragedy-time when life's fortifications are unguarded, and its lanterns cast green lights in which yesterday's trivialities get their innings as dancing imps of terror?

Sheba had been tormented by three-o'clock-in-the-morning visions before now. From her cot she had seen the little shouting corn-plaster man standing on a wheelbarrow, a giant above her head, and reaching down what seemed the distance of a block, with an arm that lengthened as she eluded it, he had tried to snatch her pocket-book from her hand, as she stood in the crowd and her eyes were blinded with light; and she had waked with a shriek on Sunday morning gaspingly to recover the memory that she had really spent a dime for a box of russet-shoe polish in Ninth Avenue, the night before, from the irresistible orator behind the corn-plasterer, when she had not a russet shoe to her feet and was twenty-five cents short on her insurance. She knew about this kind of filmy draped ghosts that change shape and finally melt and disappear in the light of day, leaving only the disposal of a trivial obligation to dispel them utterly.

But this was of another sort. It waked her with a sense of discomfort only, and a vague foreboding which took a far worse shape than the bugaboo of her dream as the mists of sleep cleared and left it before her frightened consciousness, a naked, horrible fact. Yes, it was true. Her people were coming. It was not a dream. They were coming, expecting to visit her in her own home. She had told them she had a home—she had even described it to them; and they were coming—yes, they were coming. Jake Byers, the preacher, was coming, and Sol Tyler, and maybe her stepsister Cely, and the Lord knew how many more. When she had gone over and over the fact in her mind, she suddenly dropped back on her pillow and closed her eyes, and as she drew the comforter up over her breast her hand touched an envelop which lay there. It held her funeral insurance policy. She always kept it about her person, to make sure that in case she should die suddenly it should be found—a wise precaution for one prospectively alone in death. And so, pinned inside her dress during the day, and at night attached to her chemise, the policy bore her company.

Excepting a few old clothes, it was the only

thing she possessed in the world, and when her hand accidentally touched it this morning she clutched it with a pitiful, convulsive movement. In a moment, still pressing her hand over her treasure, she suddenly sat up in bed, and in another she had risen to her feet; and when she had picked out her things from the floor, she tiptoed cautiously out of the room. She was in so much trouble that it irritated her to see others asleep, and she even resented the snores by which they seemed to boast that they were sleeping.

As she went out she mumbled: "Do, fer Gord sake, lemme git out o' dis bedlam whar I kin hear myse'f think!" And when she had gotten quite beyond ear-shot she added: "Thank Gord I ain't no po' white! Deze heah Dutch an' Irish can out-sno'e a sugar-house in grindin' season."

When she had reached the laundry, she pushed up the window, and stood within it, breathing deeply. It was her habit thus to fill her lungs when she arose, the nights seeming to leave her weary and short of breath.

Day had not yet broken, and it was nearly dark. Still, she could discern the form of a black cat as it ran across the back yard, and

when it uttered a low "Miaou!" she shuddered from the habit of fear. It was a bad omen—a black cat's crossing her vision and crying out to her in the dark. It was a sign of death. At another time she would have put down the window and come quickly away; but not so now. After her first shock she laughed almost bitterly as she muttered: "Miaou away much as you like. I on'y wusht to Gord you 'd fetch me de fatal message about de middle o' nex' week. I'd show dem Broom Corners a sight."

She lit the gas as she spoke, and took the policy from her bosom and unfolded it, and as she looked over it she read aloud slowly: "A white cashmere shroud—an' a cherry-wood coffin—wid silver handles—dicatorated wid flowers—an' six veiled mo'ners—an' a fun'al oration—an' de dead-march—an' a plumed hearse—an' fo' ca'iages—" And as she began nervously to refold it, she added: "Oh, Lord, send it quick—send it quick! Yas, kitty, I pray de Lord you come wid de fatal message, shore 'nough. *I'm petered out!*"

She was coughing a little from the chill air, and she turned from the window to the faucet, where she washed her face, and then she began putting on her clothes.

"Dis heah fun'al policy is a fus'-class chist pertector," she chuckled, as she presently laid the envelop inside her corset.

"Eh, Lord! ef I could on'y reelize on it nex' week I'd mek dem bottom-lan' delicates open dey eyes."

Her words were unmeasured, consciously expressing only her distress; but when they fell upon her ears a meaning beyond her thought startled her, and she held her breath. If she could only realize on the policy next week!

"What 's de matter wid drawin' dis fun'al *in advance*, I'd like to know?" she muttered presently. "I ain't got much longer to live nohow, an' I kin pay on it long as I hold out, an' take to de potter's field when I die. It's as good a place to lay in as any, ef a pusson don't try to ca'y name an' station into it. Jes so I 'm in hearin' o' Gab'iel's horn—"

It was a seed-thought that had come to her, and it had fallen into willing soil under forcing conditions. In ten minutes it had not only taken root, but was flourishing and throwing out tendrils of hope in every direction.

The scheme was great. It would eliminate the personal quantity absolutely, and her dig-

nity would be vindicated in the eyes of her scornors. Of course, the Broom Corn delegates would be notified and invited to the funeral in a body. The company gave sample funerals sometimes on occasion. Why not give one now, and just name it after her?

If only Mr. Stein could be made to see it as she saw it!

At first, naturally enough, Mr. Stein could not be made to see it at all. Indeed, he virtuously denounced it on sight as simply "villainous," emphasizing his disapproval with a volley of polite profanity.

As the benefits of the exceptional attendance unfolded themselves to his alert ears, however, he began to veer a little and to ask questions.

Ten societies were to be represented. And there would be several delegates from each, nearly all of whom she would probably know, and who would come to her funeral.

Of course there were many difficulties.

For one important thing, her friends would wish to see the corpse. This, however, Sheba blew away with a breath. She would leave last requests. Indeed, every obstacle finally gave way under the pressure of her superior will, and it was soon Mr. Stein who was suggesting things. As a proxy, for instance,

there were two customers on hand now, awaiting burial. One was a suburban lady whose family had sent her in, but he had found that her policy was not paid up. He had intended to put her quietly away, not because he was in any way obliged to do so, but simply because he considered her room better than her company. She was about Mrs. Jackson's color. "Y'unger, perhaps, but yust apout de face, py golly! Maybe, after all, ve could ugspose der corpse." So he developed the scheme.

When Sheba sat at the ironing-board in the laundry, that night, writing home, she was more than once obliged to lay down her pen and hold her aching sides for laughing.

Of course, the letter expressed her delight in the prospect of seeing her people. "She wrote only a few lines, because she was so very busy moving. The house where she had lived had just burned to the ground, and her things had been saved only by a chance. She would meet the delegates at the station, and take them home for dinner."

The letter closed with the casual remark that she was suffering a little with "palpitation of the heart," but she was otherwise well.

This was the edge of the wedge.

A later letter, which followed in a few days, although gay and hopeful in spirit, let fall another hint of heart trouble. She had decided upon "heart failure" for her taking off. She had discovered that it was a swell New York method. Several distinguished people had been reported as dying of heart failure. It had a good sound, and was sudden and unexpected.

When she had proposed the mock funeral, Sheba had not dreamed of anything so audacious as attending it herself, but the plan had scarcely assumed definite shape before she determined to do so. Indeed, when the idea had once entered her mind, nothing could dissuade her, and there was really no considerable risk in it. She was emaciated in comparison with her former self, and she had learned the Afro-urban art of effectively applying red and white to a dark skin. Added to these screeneries, there was a new bearing, of which she was unconscious. She held her arms nearer her body than of old, as people learn to do in a crowded city, and she pitched less than she had done in her spacious field life at Broom Corn.

WHEN she entered the chapel, a full ten

minutes before the hour appointed for the obsequies, surely no one would have known her, not even Bridget, the cook, had she met her suddenly, beplumed and veiled, in the hallway. Sheba had crept out of her cot during the night before, and stealthily descended to the basement, where she easily "borrowed" such finery as she needed from several trunks in storage there.

Mr. Stein saw her when she came into the chapel, and when he recognized her he came forward and politely led her to a front seat. As she sat and looked upon the silver-handled coffin, covered with flowers, before the altar, and realized its implication, her heart thumped so that it shook her body.

Mr. Stein was very busy putting last touches here and there, and when he finally satisfied himself, he came and formally invited Sheba to examine the decorations. He had evidently done his best. Long sprays of smilax depending from the chandelier found effective attachment in the handles of the casket, and there were standing in every direction ferns and palms galore, all chemically treated mummified affairs, waxed and awful, grim monuments of death simulating life.

As Sheba stood beside the coffin, filled with admiration and a gruesome triumph, she was suddenly seized with a wild desire to see the face within. She had a mean feeling of resentment toward it, as a usurper who was taking advantage of her in her extremity, and whose place in the potter's field she would herself have to occupy.

"Some folks is sho born to luck," she was maliciously reflecting, while Mr. Stein slid back the coffin lid; but when she peeped in she gasped.

"Who is it?" she whispered hoarsely, when at last she could speak, turning to Mr. Stein, whose soft hand supported her elbow.

"Nopoddy," he replied. "She 's schust de tummy; she 's vax. But ain't she a taisy, heh?"

The real presence of death in the garment of life was bad enough, but there was something even more gruesome and revolting in this second masquerade. Involuntarily Sheba shrank back, shuddering, from the ghastly thing.

Seeing her embarrassment, Mr. Stein hastened to explain: "Dot oder party vot loogs like you olready, her vamily hanks too close-t around. Odervise ve vould have udilized her,

und your friendts could haf looked upon der faze of der corpse. She vas schust your schtyle ugzaactly. Some of her peoples got inwited to your funeral to-day, und ven dey see der peautiful ceremony I t'ink maybe dey put up de money. De tummy, ve put 'er in for veight, schust, so de ball-bearers dey don't sushpecd not'ing. She veighs a hund'ed und eighdy-nine pounds olready."

She had heard scarcely a word he said until now, but his last words startled her.

"Dat 's de precise notch I weighed when I come f'om Broom Corn," she drawled, in an awed voice, "an' fer face an' features, look like I kin see myse'f layin' dar. I 'm jes swathed in a col' sweat lookin' at myse'f. Tell de trufe, 'cep'n' fer de tightness o' dis frock an' de way it 's got de spine o' my back on a strain, I 'd think maybe it was me."

Mr. Stein turned and scanned her narrowly.

"*But der mout'!*" he exclaimed.

"You can't jedge nothin' 't all 'bout my mout sence my toofts all drapped out. Dat Eighth Avenyer doctor he gimme a overdose-t o' calomon. When dey fell out, seem like my courage fell wid 'em, too."

Seeing him still dubious, Sheba bethought her of the tintype—one of the original three

which she carried in her pocket-book. In a moment she had taken it out and held it up before him.

"Dat was me on'y jes but two yeahs ago," she said tentatively.

Mr. Stein was satisfied. With a wave of his hand he dismissed the subject, and when he arranged the flowers on the coffin again he placed them lower on the lid, as he chuckled, "Ve oggshibit de corpse."

While they spoke there came a flash of lightning, and presently another, and simultaneously with the first sound of low thunder Sheba heard footsteps on the stairs, and she staggered rather than walked back to her seat.

The comers were the hired mourners. They wore long black veils, and when they had reached the coffin, walking by twos, they separated, taking seats, four at the head and two at the foot of the casket. Of course they were not in the secret. Some secrets are for the principals only—and the fewer of these the better.

It was not long before the Broom Corn delegates came tramping up the stairs, their new brogans on the uncarpeted steps sounding like a drove of horses. Sheba recognized their tread, and she tried to fan herself care-

lessly when she knew they were entering, but her hand trembled so that she was obliged to lay down her fan.

She sat near the wall, and by turning a little she could see her own people when they came up the aisle. There were several women among them, and these hid their faces in their handkerchiefs with a proper show of grief. When the presiding minister appeared, arrayed in clerical robes, Sheba was much impressed; still her chief thought was of the effect upon her friends, for even in this critical moment her mental comment was, "I s'pec' dey 'll all think I done turned High Church 'Piscopal up heah in New York."

But when the minister began to lead in prayer, and she heard the brave responses of her people, whose cries of "Amen!" and "Glory!" came clear and strong from several directions, she was strangely moved.

The service was imposing from the beginning, and if the sermon was short and somewhat impersonal as a tribute, it was pyrotechnic in its oratory; and when it came to a dramatic close, Sheba knew by the breathless stillness that followed that the hour was ripe, and she raised her thin voice and sailed in with a plantation hymn which she knew she

could count on for power. This was the only fillip she gave, but it was enough. The excitement which had flickered in ejaculations here and there now fairly burst into flame, sweeping everything before it. In the pauses, while they passed from hymn to hymn, the delegates rose one after another, and sometimes two at a time, to eulogize the lamented sister, who, while she listened to her imputed virtues, recognized her old self not at all, and there were critical moments when she almost lost her bearings.

It was only when they began to press forward to view the remains that they became quiet, and even then the silence was occasionally broken by a sob. "Brother Byers," the Broom Corn preacher, led the way, and, as a privileged character, lingered at the coffin to exchange a word with the others as they passed in turn. Sheba sat very near, and she could not help overhearing what they said. It was plain that all were deeply impressed with the splendor of the affair, and most of their comments were complimentary, which is to say that such as failed to declare that "Sis' Jackson" looked "puffec'ly nachel" found her improved in flesh—all excepting one. The only distinctly derogatory word

uttered—and, paradoxically, it was this which pleased her most—was spoken by the reverend Byers, him whose opposition had been a potent factor in her coming to New York.

As he leaned over the coffin, Sheba heard him whisper to Sam Simpleton, his presiding elder: "I don't want to wrong de dead, but f'om de way Sis' Jackson's face looks *to me*, I s'picion dat her suddent *demise* is de result o' *high livin'*! You know Sis' Jackson allus is hankered arter de flesh-pots." And when he shook his head mournfully, old Sam shook his, also. He thought so, too. His assent delighted Sheba especially because she had once been married to old Sam, and she hated him as few ex-husbands, even, are hated.

Sheba was standing it all very well, which means that she was keeping pretty well out of it. Although there were frequent crises when she choked up a little, she bravely maintained her position as a quiet observer almost to the end.

It began suddenly to be hard for her when she discovered that the occasional suppressed note of real sorrow that had gone to her heart and almost upset her had come from her stepsister Cely. She did not know certainly that Cely had come until she saw her

ashy face as she approached the coffin; and when she threw herself upon it, and, calling upon God to witness, accused herself of unsisterly conduct to her "beloved Queenie," for whose leaving home she freely blamed herself, Sheba trembled so that she could hardly sit up.

Cely was a shining light in the church at Broom Corn. The ultimatum of all her related experiences was always "Glory, halleluah!" and her refuge did not fail her to-day.

Sheba knew her ways, and had no respect whatever for her religion. It was not that which moved her. The ties of blood and home are strong, even though they be attenuated. It was the familiar face and the thousand memories it wakened—this, with the note of genuine grief in the wail—that tore her tired, homesick heart asunder.

There was abject, honest remorse in the broken voice that begged the waxen face for forgiveness.

Sheba had begun to sob aloud, and was so evidently losing self-control that Mr. Stein was growing uneasy, when Cely reached her climax, and, with a shriek, threw herself over the coffin, falling in a swoon.

This proved but an anti-climax, however,

for even while Cely was being carried into another room, Sheba, gaunt and wan, had risen from her seat and was trying to speak.

In this her darkest hour of guilt, when she had dared trifle with the dread mystery, a sudden light had broken upon her darkened spirit,—a light which she interpreted as conversion,—and she could not be silent another minute.

In a twinkling she had realized a saving grace and felt again the joy that had come to her but once, in her early religious experience, and she rose to proclaim her identity and her sin. She would make a full confession, and would go back home with her people, a prodigal daughter, but, by the help of God, for the rest of her days an honest woman.

As she opened her lips there came a blinding flash of lightning, accompanied by a clap of thunder.

Three times did she essay to speak, and three times was she thus silenced. But the spirit was in her, and neither principalities nor powers could hold her now.

Seeing finally that words could gain no hearing in the bursting storm, she threw up her hands, shouting, "Glory! glory!

glory!" again and again and again, with growing fervor and lessening voice, until, with a gasp, she fell into Mr. Stein's arms, and he hastened to bear her away. He carried her to the small antechamber opposite that in which the Broom Corn delegates were working over her sister, trying to bring her back to consciousness.

It had been his purpose, before starting to the cemetery, to call attention to this as one of his company's typical funerals, and to exploit its advantages; but the storm had demoralized his congregation, and the unprecedented conduct of his ostensible corpse had so demoralized him that he hastened to announce that, in consequence of the inclement weather, the interment, to which all the present company were cordially invited, would be postponed until the following morning.

He wanted to get them out of the way before Sheba should recover herself, not knowing what she might do or where he would stand. The deferred funeral would give him time to get her in order, and another opportunity to "work his business."

While he went about looking after his slowly departing guests, he stepped occasionally to the door and peeped in to see how

Sheba was getting along, and he was pleased to observe that she seemed not to have moved from her position on the lounge where he had laid her.

Some of the delegates had not brought umbrellas, and they were somewhat nervous about keeping in a body, lest they should lose their way, so that it was perhaps an hour before the last one had gone; and Mr. Stein, turning the key in the front door, drew a sigh of relief and went to look after his patient. He had explained that she was an intimate friend of the deceased, and that she was being cared for.

When he reached the door he was surprised to see that she still had not stirred. This was strange, and yet the truth did not occur to him until he got quite near and saw her face.

The strain upon her tired nerves and heart had been greater than she could bear, and at the moment when the door of heaven had seemed open to her she had been allowed to enter in—shouting, triumphant.

This tragic ending at once simplified and complicated things for Mr. Stein.

It was an easy matter enough, a few hours later, to lift out the dummy figure, and to

lay in its place her whose right it was to be there; and, to do him justice, Mr. Stein made the change with a sentiment of satisfaction that was closely akin to real sympathy. He liked to deal fairly with his customers, and it pleased him to know that this forlorn one, to whom it had seemed to mean so much, was at last to get "full value." Even while he mechanically performed the last sad offices for her, he said aloud several times, "Poor t'ing! poor t'ing!"

Her tragic passing was a relief to him only in view of her sudden turn. The ordinary hysterical woman he knew from much experience; but while he had stood beside her in her last religious frenzy, he had heard Sheba's words, and they frightened him. Twice she had declared herself, and only fire from heaven had saved him from exposure. So far her taking off was a relief. But at the same time it set for him embarrassing limitations. For one thing, it put an embargo upon his advertisement. He dare not connect the name of his company with so irregular a burial. She would be missed, and then there might be a search; there could be no doctor's certificate or license without an investigation of the circumstances. The sample

funeral had already been reported, and its postponement needed no explanation.

Sheba's name had not needed to be mentioned in the services, and for simple prudence it had been omitted.

For aught the Broom Corn delegates knew, the funeral was held in the church with which she had connected herself, and was being conducted at her expense—and they must think so still; they must go home thinking so.

The attendance on the first day was more than doubled on the next; but, shame to say, there were exactly one third of the promised dozen carriages in attendance. To do the company justice, however, there were all that were called for by the policy, which Mr. Stein would have given his hat to find, and which lay safely under Queen o' Sheba's hands, where she should hold it for all time.

The only jar in the morning funeral occurred when some friends who had not come the day before begged to see the face of the corpse, and Mr. Stein was constrained to decline.


Her face had changed so sadly during the night that they who had seen it the day before would not recognize it, so he said, and

it would only be too sorrowful a sight—which was true.

Thus, after life's weary battle, did Queen o' Sheba achieve her full final triumph.

A NOTE OF SCARLET

I

ISS MELISSA ANN MOORE was a spinster who knitted green moss mats. She had learned how to make these mats when she was very young, and constant practice had kept her art perfect through many years.

There are two classes of needlework women: there are those who learn a pattern to honor it all their days—to whom it is as a creed, and who would scorn a departure as they would scorn a heresy in religion; and others there are whom a design serves only as a hint, valuable chiefly as a point of departure into ways of their own without end. Even womanly women of this latter type have been known to confess a momentary grudge against a pair of tiny pink feet that demanded two of a kind from their all too adventurous needles.

Miss Melissa was an orthodox creature, and not more steadfast was she to the faith of her fathers than to the one moss pattern of her mothers. She fully believed that every perfectly constructed mat that emanated from her faithful fingers was foreordained to be, from the beginning of time, else it would never have been counted worthy to materialize.

There were examples of Miss Melissa's art in nearly every home in Simpkinsville—examples more or less faded and worn, according to circumstances, but all faithful witnesses of her entire worthiness to perpetuate the species. And, be it said to her credit, those that she made to sell were handled and their proportions verified with the same scrupulous care as were such as came into being for bridal or Christmas presents, or to adorn the marble base of her own evening lamp. You could measure the distance between the little moss clumps in the border of any of them, and find each one precisely as long as the index-finger of Miss Melissa's left hand, measured from the mole downward. She would no sooner have guessed at one of these intervals than she would have prevaricated in a statement of fact.

Miss Melissa lived with her married brother Caleb; and at the birth of each of his nine children there had been a pair of "aunty's lovely moss mats" ready as a welcoming gift to the little stranger, to be laid out for inspection among the pink and blue socks and sacks that were sent in by friends and relatives, after which they were withdrawn and packed away in camphor, to be kept until their owners should marry, when they would do double duty as wedding presents. Not that Miss Melissa was parsimonious. Far from it. But she was getting old, and, as she expressed it: "I 'll be mos' likely passed away long befo' that time; an' so I put a envelop o' good wishes an' advice in with each set, which it seems to me 'll be mighty impressive, comin' from a dear dead aunt, same as a voice from the grave."

She had even kept an extra pair of mats on hand, carefully wrapped and perfumed with sachet-powder, against the arrival of impending twins,—the same "runnin' in both families,"—so that, to quote again from her own lips, "the unexpected, ef it *should* come, should find itself expected in one quarter, at least." Indeed, she insisted that, for her part, she 'd see to it that a duplicate baby should n't fall

short of its welcome just for the sake of a few stitches she 'd put into a duplicate pair of lamp-mats, "an' it jest as much a blood-relation to me as its twin, every bit an' grain."

She always made her mats in pairs, because they were "intended to be made in pairs"; and she set them, "as they were meant to be set, on each end o' the mantel-shelf, with a lamp all ready to light a-standin' in the center of each one." It is true, she used one of her own pair on the small center-table in her bedroom, but she always consistently borrowed it from its station opposite its mate and put it carefully back next morning.

For twenty years and more Miss Melissa had pursued her gentle art, and, as she herself was pleased to assert, she "had n't never turned a mat out of her hand thet she would n't be more 'n willin' to have raveled out an' counted, an' ef she ever should do sech a thing as to turn off one with a false stitch in it, it would run in her head same as a tune out o' tune, an' she 'd look for a lamp to sputter quick as it was set in it."

There seems to be a serene pleasure in this kind of orthodox needlework. That there is

joy in the other sort, with its fitful departures and sometimes eccentric creations, does not alter the matter. The even tenor of unquestioningly following a lead is conducive to length of days and a fair showing of good works therein.

It is the dweller upon the plain who has seen a mountain—either seen it with his mortal eyes or evolved it out of its antithesis—who becomes discontented and—does something. What he does is—is it not?—largely a matter of temperament. He may forsake the dead level of his native heath and go in search of his mountain, or he may mope and grow weary, and have nervous prostration or “low sperits,” according to his social position.

No one knows, excepting the doctor, maybe,—and of course we all know that he does n’t,—what it is precisely that induces the condition so variously called, and which exhibits itself first in an ignoble discontent.

Why was it that, after all her years of faithful pursuit of it, Miss Melissa one day found herself restless in the practice of her art? When she wound the green zephyr for the moss border around the outsides of the parlor chairs, as she had so often done,—“settin’

each chair jest far enough from the wall to be walked behind, an' takin' in the top grape on the back o' the haircloth sofy,"—why did she stop as many as three times on the third round, and raise the strands in her fingers, studying them thoughtfully until she finally said aloud: "'T ain't because it 's green—though they do say green is forsaken; an' of co'se I know it 's exac'ly the right shade, for I 've matched it time an' ag'in by the livin' moss, an' it 's, ef anything, even more natural. I 'spect it 's my liver thet 's torpid."

She started off again, though, and did not stop until she had wound the required number of strands. When she had finished, however, instead of cutting the zephyr, she hesitated and looked at it.

"I 've got half a notion to wind on another row!" she exclaimed. "I 've often thought lately thet I 'd like to see how that moss would look ef it seemed to grow a little thicker—or thinner." And even as she spoke she began her promenade around the horse-hair set; but there was a new look in her eyes, and she walked faster than on any of the earlier rounds.

Then came the tying of the strands preparatory to the cutting. At first she mea-

sured, as always, from the mole; but when she had tied one or two in this way, she suddenly thrust her hands behind her and exclaimed: "Lordy, how tired I am of it all! I 'm a-goin' to stop an' guess at these spaces—that 's what I 'm a-goin' to do." And guess at them she did, tying faster and faster as she went.

It was her habit to take her work into the dining-room after supper, joining the family until they separated for bed; but to-night she stole into her own room, and locked the door.

That mat was never finished. Although she worked far into the night, and chuckled often over the irregularities that were so many expressions of her spirit of revolt, her joy was not full. The color wearied her. It was representative of a long way that had had no turning. Of course she could not know this. She knew only that, for some occult reason which she did not try to understand, she would have given her eyes, almost, if the strands had been red—"not none o' yo' pale pinky reds, neither, but jest a' all-fired red"; and the more she thought of it, the more the idea haunted her—the more the red invited and the green "tormented" her.

Two days afterward the center of the mat

was done, and half of its irregular growth of greenery was already in place, when, in an access of impatience that surprised herself, Miss Melissa suddenly threw it into the top bureau-drawer, turned the key, and, seizing her sunbonnet, started down the street. Within an hour a light and bulky parcel was lying, still wrapped, beside the unfinished green mat, under lock and key; and while she played with the baby in the dining-room, after supper, her brother remarked that he did n't know when he had seen Melissa looking so well or so young.

She did not wait for the family to separate, but, slipping away early in the evening, she escaped to her room, and turned the key in the door. Then she lighted the lamp and drew down the window-shade before she drew forth the parcel of scarlet wool and shook it out and held it before her, laughing aloud. Her brother was right. She did look young and pretty to-night—that is, young for forty-one, and pretty *for her*.

After admiring the hank of wool for some minutes, she laid it aside, hastily undressed, took down her hair and braided it in two long plaits for the night, and put on her flannel wrapper over her nightgown. Then she

fastened one end of the red zephyr to one of her bedposts, drew back the rocking-chair until it stood in line for attachment, steadied it by slipping a shoe under its left rocker, passed over to the sewing-machine, took its spool for her next support, and so completed a circuit. Then taking a bit of sweet-gum into her mouth, she fairly flew round and round, until the thickness of the strands "seemed jest about right," when she recklessly bit the zephyr from the ball with her teeth, and sat down. The scissors lay within reach, but it suited her mood to ignore them. She even said aloud, as she glanced at them: "Lay still; I don't need you this time"; but when she had bitten the wool, she made a wry face, and added, "Reckon I better look out an' not bite that pivoted tooth out." But she chuckled as she said it.

The making of the red mat was the marking of a new era for Miss Melissa. The note of fine fresh color in her room, in her fingers, on her lap, and always in her consciousness, even when locked from sight, in some mystic way answered a need of her monotonous life. It appeased, if it did not satisfy, the weariness that was expressed as color-hunger of her eyes; and it is not surprising if in the joy of

it she felt a sort of shame, and would not for all the world have had any one know about it.

She would light both lamps at night now, and turn them up to their full height, while she tried the effect of the mat on the mantel, putting its unfinished half in front under one lamp, while she laid the red zephyr around the base of the other, to get the effect of the balancing touch of red; and although she did not know it, the tune she hummed under her breath was one she had not sung for years. She never knew that the red mat took shape to the air of "Ever of Thee I'm Fondly Dreaming." To be fair to her, there really was no especial "thee" in her case. The term was generic, and even in this sense it was misleading. Miss Melissa had not been a woman of dreams or of imagination or regrets, nor was she in any sense sentimental.

She was acting under an impulse more lawless than any of her early girlhood, and while she experimented with the mat in various situations, she finally tried the color against her face, laying the unfinished mat as a collar on her neck. The picture pleased her, and she even pinched her cheeks till a faint color showed in them. Seeing this, she blushed to crimson from real shame, and hurriedly turn-

ing out one lamp, she humbly removed the mat from her neck and went on with her work. But she did not forget how she had looked to herself in that one brief moment when she had blushed at her own vanity, and she hummed another tune of her young days, one called "The Rock Beside the Sea," which had no more or no less application to her case than the first. Both were simply bodily reminiscent, and while she was turning backward they met her on the way.

But on the morrow, when she realized that it was Sunday, and yet she took up her mat,—she was on the second one now,—her song was still another, and there seemed to be a relation between it and her mood as she sang gaily:

I 'm going, going, going, going;
Who bids, who bids for me?

It had never been the kind of song she liked, and the girl who had sung it at school exhibitions, twenty-five years before, was one she had not admired. Yet here she was singing away at it, and on Sunday! She sang it only because it was the most reckless song she knew, and she was misbehaving as far as she could. And she was having fun.

When the family had gone to church, her voice rang out pretty loud several times, but she had no fear. Cynthy, the black cook, was shouting, "Rock-a my soul on de bosom o' Aberham!" in so loud a voice that nothing short of an explosion would have attracted her attention. Miss Melissa had pleaded headache and remained from church; or, to be fair to her, she had not used the word "headache," but had simply said that her head "did n't feel like as ef she could set th'ough a sermon," which was true.

It was a beautiful day in May, and the sound of bees came floating in at the open window. Indeed, one yellow-waistcoated fellow actually darted into the room, and flaunted his Princeton colors almost in Miss Melissa's face. Then, seeing the red zephyr, he buzzed about it several times, and, as suddenly as he had come, shot upward in a shaft of sunshine, and disappeared.

Miss Melissa's eyes followed him, and when she knew that he was gone, she suddenly realized all the outside beauty of the spring day. In imagination she saw the opening dogwood, and the stately spruce-trees filled to dripping with odorous sap, their thousands of fragrant cones fairly bursting with

a spicy stickiness. She realized the winding branch where the willows swung their light-green fringes and the clumps of wild plum were in flower. It was the plum-blossoms that decided her. She sprang from her chair and got her bonnet. Then she wrapped her knitting carefully in a fresh handkerchief, stuck it in her pocket, and started out.

It was not her fault that on her way through the cow-lot she saw the fishing-rods lying over the rafters in the cotton-seed shed. She had frankly set out to follow any vagrant impulse,—to do the thing that seemed pleasantest, to go where there was beauty and unrestraint,—and she had deliberately taken her work with her—on Sunday. She knew that she could not match the finished mat at home; but if she could have done it, she would not have wished to. The mat that was done was “a ravin’, tearin’ beauty”; and its mate would match it in recklessness, which was all she meant it to do.

But one glance at the fishing-poles made the mat seem tame. She knew as soon as she set eyes on them that she was going fishing. “No, Satan; you need n’t to get behind me—not a bit of it. You can walk before me, or beside me, or any way you choose; or you

can skeet off about your business. *I 'm a-goin' fishin'.*" While she was thus openly declaring herself, she had already begun climbing over the cattle-troughs to secure a rod. When she had got it down, it occurred to her that she ought to leave some explanation of her absence, and so she turned back, crossed the yard to the kitchen, and called: "Oh, Aunt Cynthy! Tell 'em all I 've went out to get a little fresh air; an' whilst I 'm out I 'll mos' likely go an' see how ole Mis' Gibbs is; an' ef I 'm late for dinner, tell 'em not to wait."

In about three minutes, while the fat old woman was still drawling, "What is Miss M'lissy sayin', anyhow?" the tip of a long bamboo fishing-pole was grazing the young under leaves of the sweet-gum trees in the lane, and a middle-aged maiden was singing in a low, swinging voice:

I 'm going, going—gone!

And Aunt Cynthy, dropping a bay-leaf into her gumbo-pot, turned her head and listened. "What dat?" she ejaculated. "Three times dis mornin' seem like I 's heerd sperits. I sho trus' dey ain't come to 'nounce no harm to Miss M'lissy."

And at that moment this same reserved and orderly person was on her knees before a dirty plank at the cattle-crossing, lifting squirming earthworms out of their beds with her hair-pin, and dropping them into a little pocket she had improvised by pinning up the end of one of her broad bonnet-strings upon itself. And in a surprisingly short time this same pink bonnet might have been seen a mile away,—was seen by the mocking-birds and squirrels, that came out frankly to inquire,—shining through the bush that sparsely covered the jutting rock where goggle-eyed perch were known to congregate.

As Miss Melissa settled herself upon the rock, she laughed. “Reckon I ought n’t to expec’ any luck to-day, jest to punish me; but I do, jest the same. An’ I reckon, ef I was n’t hardened, I ’d have the cold shivers puttin’ these worms on the hook an’ seein’ ’em squirm; but I don’t. Somehow, squirm-in’ is expected of a worm—one way or another. Well, they’s one comfort, anyhow: I ain’t settin’ anybody a bad example. Ef they’s one thing Simpkinsville can keep, it’s Sunday—an’ that ’s why this tickles me so.” And she chuckled again as she added, “Like as ef the fish knew any difference!”

When she had finally dropped her line into the water, carefully baited from her bonnet-string, and when she saw that the fish were not waiting to seize it, she said: "B'lieve I'll take out the mat an' knit a few rounds while the fish are getherin'"; and holding her rod awkwardly with her knees for the moment, she drew out the parcel. Before she was hand-free, however, the cork sank quite out of sight. There was a scramble, and in a second a fine "goggle-eye" flapped into her very lap, dropped over her shoe, and fell with a splash back into the water.

For a moment she felt as if she would never recover from the panic that it gave her—this actual, expected yet unexpected contact with the beautiful, shimmering, live thing. She thrust her work back into her pocket; then, mounting the bank, she cut a leaf from the palmetto, tore it into shreds, which she laid beside her, and set earnestly to fishing. And the tune that she thought now—thought rather than hummed it—was "Listen to the Mocking-bird":

H-h-h-h-h-h-h!

H-h-h-h-h-h-h!

H-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h!

H-h-h-h-h-h-h!

H-h-h-h-h-h-h!

H-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h!

So, without vocalization, her spirit sang the sprightly measure, and she knew not at all that it was because the mocking-bird's trill was in her ears all the time. Nor, when she smiled down to the bank, had she the least idea that it was because the tiny blue and purple blossoms along its margin were all in broad grins, nodding to her. Even when she tried to fit her tune to the funny darting movements of the black-satin-backed bugs that went through their dance-figures for her on the water's surface, she was consciously thinking only of her line. She had thrown open all life's doors and windows, and was letting in light and color and sound; and she knew only that she was out on a great lark, and she was reckless as to where it might lead her. Of course it was all wicked, and she would be in sackcloth and ashes pretty soon; but she would not feel that she was there for nothing. She was earning her penance.

The fish bit finely, after a little. Silver and speckled beauties followed one another on the cruel palmetto strip, whose lengthening burden kept up a perceptible movement in the water, even though the string hung deep. In through the delicate coral gills, and out by way of the pretty mouths, so she strung them.

There is such a thing as fishing's being *too*

good. It lacks the zest of patient angling. So Miss Melissa must have found it to-day, for she remarked, as she sent a slim perch down the fatal string to the number thirty-one, "I wish to goodness you-all would n't bite so fast, an' give me a chance to fish."

Of course she was fishing merely for sport—a most cruel thing to do, even on a week-day. To have carried the fish home would have been a village scandal. Still, knowing this, she had not the courage to throw them back into the stream. She thought of it, but only for a moment, and her argument against it closed with: "An' maybe ketch the same one over an' over ag'in? No, not much. Ef I say to myself, 'I 've caught a dozen fish,' I 'll know I 've *caught* a dozen. But I 'll do my best for 'em. I 'll string 'em, an' hang 'em in their native element; an' ef they 're lively, time I git through maybe I 'll turn 'em loose—*maybe*; though I 'd hate to ketch the same ones over ag'in, even ef it was next week. Ef ole Mis' Gibbs did n't have sech an inquirin' mind for scandal, an' sech a talent for distribution, I 'd take 'em up an' fry 'em for her—an' I 'd eat my share, too."

And here she stopped suddenly, as if surprised by a new thought.

"Would n't that be perfectly lovely?" she said slowly, in a moment. "But of co'se I could n't do it—an' no fryin'-pan here, nor nothin', an' no match to light a fire, even ef the smoke could be persuaded not to rise."

Could it be possible that Miss Melissa Ann Moore, Sunday-school teacher and secretary of the Foreign Missionary Society, was contemplating a solitary fish-fry on the holy Sabbath? Perhaps not.

She fished until she was very tired, and then, fighting her fatigue as a baby fights sleep, she kept on from sheer inability to stop until she had used her last bait. Then, hastily wrapping her line, she drew up the fish and looked at them.

"Pity I could n't send you over to the porehouse for the widders, like Deacon Tyler does his week-day surpluses," she said, addressing the fish; "but of co'se you 're a Sunday ketch, an' noways fitten to nourish a Christian widder. Lordy, but what a sinner I am to be referrin' so familiar to Deacon Tyler, an' he sanctified these ten years an' over! Funny notion that was of Mis' Gibbs's thet he ain't never married because they ain't no sanctified woman fitten to mate with him! She settles everybody's hash, one way or an-

other. But I reckon she 's about right when it comes to him. Wonder what she says about me not bein' mated, ez she calls it? *I'd as lief think o' marryin' that ole feller the bishop told about that set his life away on top a pillar—St. Simon What-you-may-call-'im—I forgit his surname. Not thet I don't reverence the deacon—*"

Miss Melissa had not had the least sense of fear, and yet, when she presently heard footsteps behind her, she felt a sudden terror lest she should fall off the bank. She was too much frightened even to glance over her shoulder when the bush against her arm trembled; but in a moment her fear was relieved in part, as she recognized the tall, gaunt figure that emerged from behind her and took a seat upon a projecting rock about a dozen yards from where she sat. It was one she had seen once before. She instantly realized it to be that of a vagrant negro, and she knew that he had come for his dinner—he or she. This very non-committal and elusive old person, whose haunts were the cane-brake and the swamp, had been in slavery days a menace to the runaway, who feared his evil eye and silent potency in witchcraft—for he was a mute; and when it was discovered that

he frequented the brake he was not molested. The "haunt" that the negroes were afraid either to kill or to confront was better than a pack of hounds to clear the thicket, and so "Silent Si," responsible neither to law nor order, had lived a charmed life, done as he pleased, and was reckoned no more than the other half-shy, half-bold inhabitants of the woodland. Some said he was a voodoo woman who had escaped from the Barbour plantation seventeen years before—a woman who could cast spells at long range, and had made so much trouble on the bayou that when she ran away she was not pursued. Then there were others who felt sure he was a man who once lived on Bayou Lafourche, and who had strange white spots on his body, and claimed that God was gradually making him over into a white man, though a few feared him as a leper. And there were other stories, but none of them invited friendship with the uncanny personality that even yet chose the life of a hermit, and whose clothes, rescued from the village dumping-ground and laundered in the creek, were so freely promiscuous in their suggestions as to be entirely non-committal.

When Miss Melissa had recovered from her

first surprise, she burst into a hearty, ringing laugh. "Well," she exclaimed, "ef they 's one person on earth thet I 'd be willin' to see me here, it 's you, Silent Si."

For some minutes she sat chuckling to herself over what seemed a humorous situation.

"Don't reckon he even knows it 's Sunday—or thet they is any Sundays, for that matter. Don't seem like they could be any need of religion in a cane-brake, noways, with no other sinners round. Most of our needs of grace is th'ough dealin' with our feller-man, looks to me like, though I don't know. I 've been doin' pretty well to-day all by myself.

"Lordy, ef this ain't the funniest! Even ef he knew me, he could n't tell.

"Well, they 's one thing, shore: I 'm a-goin' to give him my fish. Yas, I 'm a-goin' to give him my fish, an' see thet he has one square meal, anyhow. He can't break a Sabbath that he ain't never heard of; an' as for me, well, maybe the good Lord 'll let the charity of it balance the Sabbath-breakin'."

At this, she called bravely:

"Si! *Oh*, Si!"

"*Oh*, Si!" answered a distinct echo from across the creek.

It seemed a mocking reminder of the mute's deafness, and there was something so uncanny in it that, although Miss Melissa laughed, it was with nervous laughter.

"Well, you cert'n'y are deaf in both ears, old Si," she chuckled; "for ef you could n't hear out o' the one on this side, the echo has sampled the other for me. This would be a good place to fetch the deacon to. I would n't feel so called to quote Scripture to him ef I could jest locate his good ear. I know ef he catches one word of a Scripture quotation he can finish out the verse, an' I've more 'n once fell back on the Bible for conversation when a worldly remark was on the tip o' my tongue. I know it 's the right ear thet 's good, an' yet I'm so used to makin' allowances for me bein' left-handed thet somehow I gen'ally git confused an' say things in the deaf side. But out here the echo would be bound to strike it.

"I see Si is spittin' on his bait for luck. He 's learned *some*thin', ef he *is* deaf. Maybe he does know it 's Sunday, after all. I reckon some folks would be afeard of him, out here by theirselves, but I ain't. I ricollect too well what a mild face he had the day he come out o' the bresh, that summer, when

we was cl'arin' off the ground after our Sunday-school picnic, an' I give him a lot o' the scraps. I was n't a bit afeard of him then. I jest passed the things to him on a broom because some folks said he had the leprosy. Of co'se time has proved he ain't got that. I believe I 'll unwrap my line an' fling it over his, an' make him take notice."

No sooner said than done. Attracted thus, the mute turned and looked at her. With a motion of her hand she held his attention until she had drawn up the string of fish, and then by a simple pantomime she offered them to him. A difficult medium of communication seems sometimes to be conducive to a swift understanding, for in a surprisingly short time these two people, who had met only once in a twilight wood many years before, had so well understood each other without the aid of speech that the mute was building a fire under a ledge of the rock a few feet away,—a secret hiding-place from which he soon brought forth a rude cooking equipment,—and Miss Melissa Ann Moore was scaling fish with her own hands, using for the purpose first one and then the other blade of her scissors. She had rolled up her sleeves, and pinned up her dress-skirt to

serve as apron, and while she scraped off the silver scales and trimmed the glittering fins, she hummed a tune into which she was presently fitting the words, "From Greenland's Icy Mountains."

Her song was low at first, a soft, gurgling treble; but as she went on it gradually yielded to the inspiration of the wood, abetted by the brave note of a stalwart bird that poured out his joy from a tree above her, until she was singing as she had never sung in her life before.

It was a fine duet for a while, but soon neighboring birds, hearing it, came and sang with the two until the woods rang; and no one but God heard the anthem—God and perhaps the squirrels and other voiceless creatures who came out of hiding to peep and to listen. Miss Melissa, strange as it may seem, was all unaware of aught save delight. It was as if the long-pent joy that ought to have expressed itself through years of living had suddenly burst forth, demanding right of way, and converting her, for the time, into a simple instrument of song. And the birds, knowing the life-notes, understood, and sang with her.

And all the while she mechanically con-

tinued to scale the fish. But so translated was she that when the mute came and stood beside her, she did not see him until a breeze blew his skirt across the line of her vision, and she turned. When her eyes fell full upon the slender oval face of the tall yellow "human" standing dumbly beside her, she stopped singing and withdrew her hands. He took the motion for permission, and quickly gathered up the fish and returned to the fire. His coming so near had broken the spell and brought her back to earth. She watched him in awed silence for a moment, and then she said, quite as if the circumstances were in no wise out of the ordinary:

"Well, whilst the picnic 's progressin', reckon I might 's well knit a few rounds on the red mat."

Suiting the action to the word, she took out her knitting, and as her needles flew she soon fell into speculative discourse with herself concerning her companion.

"I declare," she began, "I feel like as ef I was jest about half in a dream, an' liable to wake up any minute; but I'd be mighty disappointed ef I was to wake up before them fish are fried an' e't. No, 't ain't no dream; they say you can't never dream smells. Ef

anybody had 'a' told me, I would n't 'a' believed he 'd be so clean about it—washed his hands in the branch even before he built the fire. An', come close-t to 'em, her clo'es is more faded 'n they are dirty, anyhow; an' I'm shore no hair could be whiter—jest like the driven snow—”

She had dropped her knitting in her lap while she watched the silent figure at work. There was something so weird about it all that even Miss Melissa, unimaginative as she was, felt the strange spell.

“What would I give ef I could git her to come an' set down here by me an' tell me the story of her life! They can't be a life without a story, an' I reckon hers would be so unnatural thet it would make a good book. No speech,—no relations,—no knowledge of Gord or the devil—jest herself, day in an' day out.

“Or hissself,” she added, seeing the mute break a stick of wood across his knee. “But jest to think of thinkin' thoughts with no words to think 'em in! I would n't undertake it, I know. Thoughtless words are common enough, but wordless thoughts—I can't conceive of sech a thing. Imagine me tryin' to think in Hindu an' not knowin' so much

as *polly fronsay* in it to explain my thoughts to my mind. I often wonder what sech a one will do at the jedgment, when he 's required to give an account of hisself.

"But he must have ricollections of some-thin' or somebody. But I'd think even ricollections 'd git to be monotonous, after a while, for a main dependence. Somehow, I doubt ef he remembers anything. I reckon he jest gits up every mornin' an' scrimmages for food, an' goes to bed at night an' rests from his scrimmagin'. Come to think of it, that 's what all the world 's a-doin', more or less.

"I s'pose they 's any number o' places where he 's got fryin'-pans an' things hid, an' little strips of bacon like that he 's fryin' with now.

"Meal in a bottle with a cork in it! Who'd ever 'a' thought o' sech a thing! Well, it 's a good way to keep it dry. I s'pose the annual picnic leavin's is the same as a Christmas dinner to him. They say it don't make no difference where they have the picnics,—down at Silas's mill, or at the camp-meetin' grove, or up at Pump Springs,—he always gits wind of 'em an' somebody sees him prowlin' round for the fragments; but from this



"SHE HAD DROPPED HER KNITTING IN HER LAP."

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time on, I intend to see that he finds something more 'n broken victuals. I 'd do that much for a dumb brute without a soul to save. What is he doin' now, for gracious' sakes? He 's a-cuttin' off a bunch o' that palmetter an' tyin' it to a pole. I do wonder ef he 's a-goin' to sweep the ground off before he sets the food on it. He don't know it 's a sin to sweep on Sunday, I don't reckon. Ef I did n't have this mat to finish, I 'd try the deaf-an'-dumb alphabet on him, an' spell out the fo'th commandment."

The mute had, indeed, fashioned a rude broom from the materials at hand, and before Miss Melissa could anticipate his intention, he had taken a beautiful leaf of the green palmetto, laid it on the improvised broom, placed the fish and a corn-dodger upon it, and, standing at arm's-length, was presenting it to her.

It meant recognition.

So she had served him years ago in the twilight wood. She was much startled for the moment, but a swift glance at his pathetic face touched her almost to tears. As she looked into his eyes a flicker of servile pleasure illumined them—a flicker that she felt rather than saw, like the blink of a summer

sky when one says, "Was that lightning?" and cannot be quite sure whether it was until it comes again.

When she took the fish she was so agitated that she said, "Thank you, Si," quite aloud; but the words fell upon his back, for he had not lingered.

For some minutes Miss Melissa sat and looked at the feast—it seemed a feast, for the hour was late, and she was hungry—before she could recover herself enough to touch it. But finally she drew the palmetto up on her knee, and began her novel meal, which she ate as unquestioningly as a child. She had been all her life accustomed to the negro's hand as a server of food—the negro, taken many times without question from field or forest work; and when once this sort of service is accepted, and one learns the usual cleanliness of the shapely hands of the most uncouth among them, he has arrived at a comfort point which does not always exist in more pretentious serving. The old "aunty" who shucks her roasting-ears all over her kitchen floor, and spreads her baby's pallet on the pile of bark in the corner, will make biscuits as white as snow, and her pine table will show its pretty grain even down its

scoured legs. The floor is hers, but her hands and the table where she prepares his feasts are consecrate to her master's service.

It was some minutes before Miss Melissa thought of looking after the mute, and when she did look he was gone. There was not even so much as a trace of the fire he had built upon the ground. Indeed, she would not have known where it had been but for the pile of brush he had drawn over the spot.

She stopped eating, and looked about her.

"Well," she exclaimed, "I don't doubt a minute but what I 'm hoodooed, an' none o' the things I seem to see are really happenin'.

"Of co'se here 's the fish, an' my red mat; an' there 's my fishin'-pole, layin' where I throwed it over the buckeye-bushes. That much is real. But that gray squir'l climbin' down the tree-limb, there, looks like as ef it might easy be in a dream an' suddenly dissolve. I do declare, I feel almost like as ef I was in the Garden of Eden. Ef I was to see a snake anywhere, I 'd fully expect it to enlarge an' come forward an' try to tempt me. I wonder what time o' day it is, anyhow? I see the shadders is all reversed, an'—

"Why, it 's gittin' dark!"

She rose to her feet and looked about her and shuddered.

"Deary, deary me!" she said, "how far wrong one bad act will take a person! Only three days ago I stopped counting my strands—an' now what an awful sinner I am! Will I ever have forgiveness an' peace of mind again, I wonder?"

"What would the deacon say—or even Gord? Somehow, I don't mind the Lord knowin' it ez much as I would the deacon. He 's *so* sanctified. An' of co'se Gord knows all the ins and outs of it, how werried I was, an' he 's authorized to blot out. Maybe this is the real me, after all, an' I have n't been no more 'n a hypocrite all these years.

"No," she added, looking upward, "'t ain't that. Whatever it is, I ain't a hypocrite, I *know*. Some say Gord judges us by our best days, an' some say he holds us for our worst. An' then, ag'in, some say he averages. Maybe ef he 'll average up these last three days with my forty-one years of tryin' to live righteously, it 'll seem like as ef I 've been passable good right along.

"But I must be goin'."

II

THERE were bedtime twitterings in the brush on every side now, and the shaft of sunlight that had a moment before revealed the glories of the greenery all about her passed out even while she looked, and Miss Melissa realized her isolation in a momentary sense of fear. But this wood, and the banks of the stream that wound in and out of it for miles, had been the familiar playground of her childhood. She remembered it when there were tales of bears and wildcats there, and she knew where several Indian graves were, within a stone's-throw of where she sat—graves that were witnesses to some stirring times in which her grandfather had taken part. It would be hard for her to be really afraid here, even in the dense copse where she had hidden. In a moment she was smiling at the idea, and to make sure of herself she went back to the jutting ledge, and deliberately threw the fragments of her dinner into the water, so as to leave no vestige of the occasion.

She dropped them in slowly, one at a time, and watched them while they floated a minute, or sank as they fell; and her calm exterior

gave no hint of a new panic that had begun to rage within her. She had felt it for a moment when the mute first disappeared, and while she stood alone in the darkening wood it came again. It was the inevitable home-going that confronted her. She had always been truth itself, and she would have to give an account of this broken Sabbath—probably within an hour. She felt sure that her brother was already inquiring for her and watching the gate, and that her nervous sister-in-law was declaring herself “certain an’ sure somethin’ awful had happened”; and in all probability Sally Tolbert, and Mis’ Allen, and maybe the Tompkins children, had been over during the afternoon to see how she was, having missed her at church. Possibly even Deacon Tyler had dropped in, with his ear-trumpet, so as not to miss any detail of an illness that had been serious enough to keep her from service. He always went to inquire for the sick. In imagination she could hear her sister-in-law screaming into the trumpet that “the last seen of Sis’ M’liss’ was thus or so. Cynthia had watched her go through the gate, and had heard her say something about old Mrs. Gibbs, she thought.”

This last reflection was suggestive and

helpful. She had intended to go and see how old Mrs. Gibbs was, and she would go now, late as it was. That old lady had cataracts on her eyes, so the doctors said, and she was impatiently awaiting the period of full blindness, that darkest hour before the dawn when the world might be hers again.

Miss Melissa would go now, and offer to take her to evening service; and her family, seeing her there, might assume that she had been with Mrs. Gibbs all day, and not ask any questions. Mrs. Gibbs would not see that she was not dressed for church.

How stupidly a sane person can plan when his thoughts are fixed on a single point! The whole congregation would have had to have cataracts on their eyes to make it possible for one to appear in church in a gingham frock and pink sunbonnet without creating a sensation. But she would go and see Mrs. Gibbs, anyway. It would be a safe way-station in the direction of a return, and perhaps while there something would be suggested. Of course she could not take her fishing-rod with her, but she could hide it in the brush.

THERE was no light in the Gibbs cottage when she arrived, which was a good omen. Mrs.

Gibbs lighted up only for company, and she would find her alone—as she did.

Delighted at the sound of her voice, the voluble old lady greeted her with a characteristic welcome.

“Why, howdy, Melissy Ann! Howdy! I’m proud to see you. An’ I’m glad to see you ain’t expectin’ to go to church, for I don’t feel a bit worshipful this evenin’. Ef I’d heard a swish when you come in, I’d know it was my duty to go with you. Speak o’ the devil—I was jest a-thinkin’ jest now how long that bayadere silk o’ yores had lasted. I ricollec’ you bought it off’n yo’ second mat-affle, time the circus tent blowed away. Well, I’m glad you ’re better. How ’s yo’ sis’-in-law? Got over her faint yet? Or was it the child thet fainted? Some said it was *her*, an’ some *it*.”

This was an unpromising beginning. It seemed at the onset that she would be obliged to confess that she had not been at home all day. She would not be rash about it, though. If her sister-in-law had fainted in church, apparently that was all Mrs. Gibbs knew about it, and she could gain nothing by asking questions, so she said tentatively:

“Sis’ Salina ’s subjec’ to them dizzy spells

sence she 's stouted up so ; an' the doctor says it behooves her to take keer of herself, an' to take boneset an'—"

"An' camomile an' bitter aloways, to alleviate the boneset," Mrs. Gibbs interpolated. "Yas ; you can tell her for me thet I say thet when I stouted befo' I fell away the last time, that was what brought me through.

"But some folks thought maybe it was jest fright, this mornin', thet ailed her. It 's enough to scare anybody to have a cow rush into a pew du'in' services, an' to upset a whole row o' child'en, the way that cow did hers. I 've always thought it was resky an' irreligious—allowin' a cow to graze in the churchyard, the way they do, whilst the gospel is bein' preached. But of co'se nobody could 'a' foresaw her takin' a notion to attend services. They say Mis' Blanks is goin' to have it out with Jim Towers,—you know, it was his cow,—an' she says ef he don't pay for her bonnet she 'll see the reason why. Was n't it funny for her to chew up the most expensive thing in church, which everybody knows Mis' Blanks's bonnets is—milliner-trimmed fresh every season ? I ain't missed my eyesight so sence it went—never. Is'pose the cow nachelly knew straw when she saw it,

an' she had n't no respec' for a leghorn braid. Lucky thing Mis' Blanks always unties her bonnet-strings to sing, else she 'd 'a' been strangled, shore. They say the cow mooed right into Deacon Tyler's ear-trumpet, an' rose him straight out of 'is pew. You know, when he sets his trumpet for the sermon he always shets his eyes; an' the first thing he heard was 'Moo!' Of co'se I knew I was safe, in the amen corner, 'cause no Durham could get over the railin', 'less she was hard pressed. I missed the sight of it all, but my hearin' 's better 'n ever, an' to my dyin' day I 'll never forgit the words Brother Clayton said, an' how the cow changed things around. He was jest repeatin' his tex' for his fo'th head, an' he says, says he: "'An' Nathan said unto David,"—*so, Sukey, so!*' Lordy! but you missed a church circus this mornin', honey, Melissy, shore.

"But I 'm right glad to hear thet yo' sister-in-law ain't noways serious. Did she expect her brother Ben to come to-day, or was it a complete surprise? 'Mandy Jones says he 's fetched a trunkful o' presents, but his sister would n't let him open it on the Sabbath. Mis' Jones sent 'Mandy down the road to see ef they was crape on the gate, not knowin'

what a cow-horn might result in ; an' 'Mandy she see the carriage at the door, an' she went to see ef it was the undertaker, it bein' a strange carriage, an' that 's how it come out thet it was her brother Ben come back. 'Mandy did n't go in, but she counted eight child'en playin' on the po'ch, an' she see Caleb's wife rockin' the cradle with her foot, which proved it was n't empty ; so she knew they was all alive, an' she come away.

"But I don't see how you-all stand not knowin' what he 'd fetch'd you till to-morrer mornin'. Caleb's wife is shorely a godly woman—by intention. My judgment would 'a' been to open that trunk an' have a rapid distribution. She could 'a' had it opened with prayer, ef she 'd 'a' seen fit ; an' then, when the things was all give out, they could 'a' been put away 'tel to-morrer, all excep' Bibles an' sech. Even a frivolous present, received an' put out o' sight, is less distractin', in my opinion, than a doubtful box with a Bible in it. They say he claimed thet none of his presents was n't wicked, nohow, 'cep'n' the pack o' playin'-cards that he brought for the preacher, which I 'm glad to see Ben ain't lost none of his devilment in his travels. But she would n't hear to techin' that trunk. She 's got the

courage of her convictions, shore. I never will forgit how she apologized for one of her babies bein' born on a Sunday, or how relieved she seemed when one o' the attendin' ladies reminded her thet all its birthdays would n't of necessity foller on the Sabbaths.

"But you ain't told me yet whether you-all was lookin' for him or not, or—"

Before she could answer, Miss Melissa was startled by a rap at the door, and Mrs. Gibbs asked her to light the lamp. Until now, the two women had been sitting in the dark.

The light revealed a funnel-shaped instrument thrust through a crack in the door, and Miss Melissa knew that the deacon had come, and that almost certainly he was looking for her. She knew he had presented his trumpet for an invitation to enter, and so she obediently screamed, with nervous aim—just outside the funnel: "Howdy, deacon! Come in." He caught part of the greeting, however, and while she went on to say that she was just thinking it was time to go, he came in, shook hands with the two women, and sat down between them.

"Has he got his trumpet with him?" asked the brave hostess, realizing his deafness; but Miss Melissa did not hear her, either. She

felt that she must get the deacon away, if possible, before there were any revelations, and she was devoting herself to him. While Mrs. Gibbs was thinking, "Wonder ef they could be anything in him comin' here after her," that lady was screaming, in reply to his solicitous inquiry :

"Oh, yas, sir, thank you ; it's a heap better. The open air—an' then, talkin' here to Mis' Gibbs. 'T was n't exactly to say a headache, nohow. I reckon I ought to 've went to church, by rights."

"Well," said the deacon, slowly, "I can't jedge for nobody else, of co'se, but I 'd resk a good deal on yo' doin' the right thing. For myself, I know it takes all the church-goin' I 'm capable of to keep me within a stone's-throw of the straight an' narrer way. Of co'se I have n't *heard* a sermon in ten year ; but I go, an' set my trumpet *direc'* for the Word of God, an' that seems to be all thet could be expected of me. Some has insinuated thet I ought to keep my eyes open, an' from my experience this mornin', I s'pose likely I ought. But, exceptin' for self-preservation, I can't see no obligation to do it. Ef Brother Clayton would shave, I 'd obligate myself to keep awake an' watch his lips ; but

they ain't no inspiration in the motion of chin-whiskers, not even ef they are dilatin' on the gospel—not to me. But of co'se I know I ain't as good a Christian as what I ought to be, nowadays. I don't begin to b'lieve the way I've been taught, an' I ain't got the faith on all p'int's thet folks think I have, neither. F' instance, that doctrine of 'What is to be will be,' I don't begin to b'lieve it. I don't b'lieve for a minute, f' instance, thet that fool cow was fo'ordained to moo into my trumpet this mornin', an' rouse me out of a dream o' the golden streets—which she done."

He looked at Miss Melissa and waited for a reply.

"Well, I did n't see the cow—or hear her," she began irrelevantly. "Of co'se He who created the cow, an' created you, He must have known—"

"Never mind the trumpet, Miss Melissy," he interrupted, smiling; "you're on my good side. Come jest a leetle close-ter, please, ma'am, an' talk slow; an' hand this to Mis' Gibbs, so's she can express an opinion to my deaf side ef she's so disposed."

He handed Miss Melissa the ear-trumpet, and she passed it over to Mrs. Gibbs.

"Well, I b'lieve events can be helped, or

hindered," the brave hostess shouted into the funnel, glad of a chance to speak. "Ef I did n't b'lieve that I would n't have no courage to anoint my cataracts."


"An' I think thet nobody can go far wrong," added Miss Melissa, "ef he jest fol-lers the Scriptures. I know a man down here at Spring Hill, he started readin' doubt-in' books, an' first thing his folks knew, he was disputin' perpetual hell an' the fire thet's never squenched; an' several of his smarty friends, thinkin' it was becomin', they started to show off in the same way. One well-raised young man thet's got two elders an' a class-leader in his family, an' is studyin' medicine hisself, why, he up an' said he doubted the story of Jonah an' the whale, jest on physical grounds—"

"I should 'a' thought he *would* 'a' been sort o' physicked with him, shore enough," shrieked Mrs. Gibbs; "Jonah, I mean—no, *the whale*."

"An' so he was—an' physicked effectual. We 've got Scripture for that. To me, the mericle ain't that. It's the two of 'em survivin'; that's what gits me. Maybe I ought n't to say it, an' I would n't ef any of our young folks was around; but sometimes I've thought thet maybe the whole thing was n't

never intended for no more 'n a yarn. Them apostles must 've got off fakes occasional, jest to relieve the monotony, an' I don' b'lieve for a minute thet my eternal salvation has got to hinge on me a-swallerin' no fish-story over a thousand years old. Even the fresh ones we git is li'ble to suspicion—'t least, some of 'em is. I know I 've been tempted myself, an' me a deacon in the church. A inch in a fish's tail, or a ounce or so of weight, or the narrer-ness of a person's escape from drowndin', well, they seem sech harmless exaggerations, an' they give a man standin' in a community where things is pretty slow. But of co'se I ain't never done it. I 've stood by my little fish all my life, an' I 've had the durnedest luck, too, for a patient fisher. But of co'se you ladies ain't never tempted that-a-way." He looked at Miss Melissa. "You ain't never fished all day, I 'm shore, an' been tempted a thousand ways to diverge. Ef *you* was to go fishin', Miss Melissy, no doubt you 'd be as conscientious about yo' ketch as you are in knittin' them green mats."

Fortunately, he did not glance at Miss Melissa now, for her face was scarlet. She felt sure she had been discovered; and if she had broken all the commandments in one fell



impulse, she could not have been more hopelessly criminal in her own consciousness.

"I've often thought," the deacon continued, eying her mischievously the while, "that ef you would make jest one crooked mat, or turn out jest one of a false color,—say a red one,—why, the devil might have some hope of you; but so long as you set sech a example of consistency as you do, why, ef you have even so much as a sick-headache, an' stroll away for relief, we know the place to hunt you is the bedside of the sick, an', shore enough, here you are. Well, I mus' be goin'," he added, looking at his watch. "Ef you 'll accept of my company, I 'll escort you home. I would n't advise you to pass by the willer hedge alone for a few nights, for they do say Silent Si has been seen prowlin' round for a week or so, an' you might run ag'in' him—him or his haunt. Some say th' ain't nothin' but his sperit been seen for three years—not thet you 'd be *afeard* of him, exactly, either *in* the flesh or *out*."

If Miss Melissa had had a hope that the deacon knew nothing of her escapade, it was gone now; and when she rose to go, she said "Good mornin'" to her hostess, and in reply to an invitation to come again soon, she stam-

mered, "Not at all"; and when she was outside, and the deacon offered her his arm, she actually sobbed aloud. Fortunately, though, it was in his deaf ear; and before she had further committed herself, he had passed her the trumpet, saying: "I can't offer you my good ear, lest you'd be for sale on the outside the walk, so you 'll haf to do yo' laughin' an' talkin' in this. What was you laughin' at, anyhow? A deaf man can feel a chuckle he can't hear."

This was so funny that she really laughed, now, straight into the funnel. She laughed so loud and so long, and with such a growing sense of humor, that the deacon laughed with her from sheer contagion. When life's tension has been long and rigorous, and overstrained nerves recoil, it is hard to recover control sometimes. Since Miss Melissa's weeping had been translated into mirth it quite ran away with her, and it would have alarmed the deacon had he heard it all. But the snatches of it that fell into his trumpet were only sufficient to impart a sense of joyousness, and he said cheerily:

"Yo' feelin' so happy to-night is as good as a sermon to me. Notwithstandin' you have n't had the inspiration of divine service

to-day, you 've found the reward of doin' the Lord's work. You 've found it in a merry heart."

The deacon's voice was too gentle for irony. Surely, after all, he could not know.

To feel like a criminal was bad enough, but it did not approach the hopelessness of being found out. Miss Melissa cleared her throat, and looked up a little. So long as only she and God and the speechless old negro knew, she could hope to enter her closet and have it out in confession and prayer. She had anticipated the sackcloth, and was willing to endure the sting of it; but to be whipped in the market-place, figuratively if not with bodily stripes, was more than she could brook. If the deacon knew all, and would tell, this would be her fate. But he did not know. His stumbling over the live wires that connected with her conscience was only an accident; but she was so sensitive. It was easy to turn the scales either way by a feather's weight. What could have been more innocent than the good man's next remark? And yet how easily she misunderstood it, and what despair it wrought within her! Witness his artless offense:

"Many another, in sech circumstances,

havin' a headache for a good excuse, instead of doin' the Lord's work as you 've done to-day, would 'a' found some fish of their own to fry."

How simple and natural the tribute to her supposed faithfulness, but how subtle and poignant the sting upon her guilty consciousness! It was more than she could bear.

"Hursh!" she screamed, clapping the funnel quite over her lips. "Hursh, deacon! Not another word! I can't stand it. Ef you 've got the feelin' for me thet you 'd have for a yaller dog thet was bein' pursued, you 'll hursh!"

"Well, upon my word, you 're purty brash, Melissy." It was her brother Caleb who stepped up from behind them, and he had heard his sister's last words.

"Don't mind her, Caleb," the deacon said mildly; "she's jest showin' her Christian humility. Whenever I refer to her good works it seems to pleg her, but I did n't have no idee of taxin' her forbearance so severe. I found her settin' in darkness, ministerin' to ole Mis' Gibbs, jest as we s'picioned she was. I s'pose you got uneasy an' come to hunt her?"

"Well, we thought we 'd like to locate her befo' it got into the night. I s'pose it's fool-

ish to be afraid of ole Si, but somehow we 've been raised to fear him, an' I did n't know but maybe you might take a notion to come home the woods way, Sis, an' I 'd jest as lief none o' my folks would run no resks. Sev'al of the niggers say they 've saw him prowlin' aroun' our place of nights lately, but I 'spect that 's jest to clair their own skirts when things is missin'. Our child'en say somebody has went off with yo' fishin'-pole, Sis. Do you know anything about it?"

"Yas; I hid it." Her voice was pretty steady, considering the pressure upon her.

"I thought likely you had. First thing when we come home from church, the young ones started nosin' round, an' they missed it. It 's about church-time now, deacon, an' ef you want to git in for the openin' hymn, I 'll see Melissy home; or ef you—"

"No, thank you, Caleb. Not thet I 'd slight a hymn because I can't hear it, but I ain't been raised to shift a lady half-way home. You go on to church, an' I 'll be along d'rec'ly."

Miss Melissa dropped the deacon's arm.

"You both go," she exclaimed. "Nothin' ain't goin' to hurt me."

But the deacon held her fast.

"Go along, Sis," said Caleb, from behind. "You know he can't hear nothin', nohow. He might 's well be 'scortin' you home as settin' up noddin'." Caleb knew so well the range of the deacon's half-awake ear that he dared hairbreadth proximity to it with impunity. "An' ef you don't feel like comin' to preachin', which I should n't think you would after a whole day with Mis' Gibbs, you might let Cynthy go. She 's settin' half asleep in the rocker between the child'en's beds."

"I 'll stay with 'em," said Melissa. "I s'pose Saliny has gone ahead."

"Yes; she 's went to the mother's meetin' in the session-room. I promised thet ef you did n't come in time I'd look after the youngsters. They're all asleep, 'cep'n' Joe an' Sallie. They 're comin' straight from the Epworth meetin' to church."

As he left them, Caleb turned back and called to his sister: "Kind o' sorry you ain't comin' to church, Sis. Brother Clayton lays off to rouse the sleepers in the temple to-night. Goin' to preach on 'Though thy sins be as scarlet'—you know the rest of it." And as he left them he said to himself: "Dear Lord! ef them two could only see theirselves as others see 'em."

Miss Melissa made no reply, but presently she said to the deacon :

“Did you ketch what Bud said to me?”

“Well, no ; not exac’ly. I aimed for it, but my tube gits tangled sometimes. But I thought I caught somethin’ about starlight. It is a-goin’ to be a starlight night. Was that what he remarked?”

“No ; that word was ‘scarlet,’ not ‘starlight.’ He knew you ’d set out to pleg me, an’ he thought he ’d give me a partin’ shot, that ’s all. He was jest repeatin’ the tex’ Brother Clayton has give out for to-night. I wonder you ain’t mentioned it before.”

She was too angry to care much what she said, and the old deacon, although he did not in the least suspect this, felt that something was wrong with her. He had known this for some time. There was a wail in the voice that commanded him to hush, and, tender-hearted old man that he was, he felt that he could not sleep until he found out what the trouble was.

When they reached her gate, Miss Melissa, instead of asking him in, extended her hand and said good night. “I know you ’re anxious to get to church, deacon,” she began to say ; but he interrupted her :

"I ain't anxious to do nothin' but to fall on my knees and apologize right an' left, Miss Melissy. Whatever I 've done or said, God knows, but I 've hurt yo' feelin's, an' I would n't 'a' done sech a thing, not for nothin' on earth. Ef you 'll jest let me go in an' set down a minute—I did n't ketch the drift o' what Caleb said about his wife, but I reckon she 's likely gone ahead to join the other mothers, as usual; an' ef so, we 'll have the parlor to ourselves, an' you kin fetch a lamp an' scan my features for honesty while I tell you *I 'm innocent of whatever I 've done!*"

It was rather scant politeness, but Miss Melissa said not a word as she led the way into the house.

When she had dismissed the negro, and drawn her chair beside the deacon's,—one must needs sit close to a deaf man,—she laid a parcel upon the center-table at her elbow, and began to speak; but the deacon interrupted her.

"Befo' we explain fully, Miss Melissy," he said, "I want to say a word. I 'm afeard my talk this evenin' clair disgusted you, an' I 'm sorry I said them things about the whale. I know how you feel about all Scripture, an' I ought to 've kep' my mouth shet."

"You need n't feel bad about that, deacon. To be candid, after the first shock, it sort o' made me feel nearer to you to find thet you was human an' frail. Of co'se I don't share yo' misgivin's. I believe all the Holy Scripture verbatim, word for word. But I 'm of a dangerous disposition. Ef I started to doubt, they 's no tellin' where I 'd go. But I 've always looked upon you as ef you was a sort o' stained-glass apostle with a halo on, like them two in the 'Piscopal winders. Seemed like as ef you jest lived up to everything perfect, even to yo' deafness—'scuse me mentionin' it. Am I talkin' loud enough?"

"Yas; I hear every word. Settin' so, with the house still, I can even hear that lamp sizz. Don't you reckon you better turn it down?"

She turned the wick as she went on:

"An', as I said, yo' havin' faith-weakness was a sort o' comfort to me. I don't know but it makes what I 'm about to say a little easier for me. Of co'se you know all about my mats; you 've showed that."

"About yo' mats? Why, cert'n'y. Everybody does; an' I think they 're to be strongly recommended—both for shape an' usefulness, an' du'ability, too; an' ef anybody says I ever said different—"

"I 'm not refrerrin' to my green mats, deacon, an' you know it. I 'm refrerrin' to these."

She opened the parcel, and spread the scarlet mats upon her lap.

"But how you found out about 'em I don't know, but you 've acknowledged you did; an' now I 'm goin' to out with the whole thing. I s'pose the devil tempted me. As you said this evenin', ef I ever condescended to make a red mat, or one out o' kilter, the devil might have hopes of me. Well, here 's two—both all-fired red, an' knit with no mo' conscience than a cat 's got. The best part of this last one I 've knit to-day—Sunday. Not a stitch counted in either one, an' how they turned out so everlastin' pretty I don't know. It 's like the reward of vice. Yas; every minute thet I ain't been fishin' to-day, I 've knit—pretty near. Don't put on surprise, deacon. You 've kep' a-hintin' about my fryin' my own fish, an' throwin' up about me bein' afraid of Silent Si, so of co'se you know about our picnic. I went fishin' this mornin', 'stid o' goin' to church, an' happened to come up with the old nigger; an' I give him the fish to cook, an' then, why, we picnicked. I did n't set down to the table with him, of co'se—him or her, whichever it is. An' I had n't been to

Mis' Gibbs's ten minutes sca'cely, this evenin', when you come, which of co'se you knew, although you referred so sarcastic to findin' me a-tendin' the sick.

"I s'pose likely I 'm goin' to perdition. I don't know, I 'm shore; but I did n't start with no sech intention." Her lip quivered here just a little.

"The fact is, I got sick an' tired o' them green mats, an' wo'e out with everything—all in about three days; an' ef I had n't started out this mornin', an' spent all the energy I had left in Sabbath-breakin', I b'lieve I 'd 'a' died. I 'm forty-one years old, an' I 've green-matted tel I 'm about played out.

"I ain't been to a circus, or got on a steam-car, or had a dress made out o' the house—not for over twelve years. I ain't even had the luxury of a spell o' sickness, with betterin' days an' neighbors' trays sent in—not for nine years. It's jest been mat-knittin' whenever I 'd try to git a little diversion from the duties of a aunt an' sister-in-law, an'—an'—an'—

"Well, it broke out in me all of a sudden, this week, an' this is what it 's led to. Of co'se you can't never respect me no more; but they 's one thing: *you can't pleg me like you*

attempted to do to-night. Nobody dast to do that, not even an apostle hisself, ef they was one alive.

"Ef I 'm put out o' the church for to-day's misconduct', why, out I go, that 's all; but I 'll give myself up; the conference won't haf to summons me."

She had been borne along so fiercely by her own passion that she had failed to see the growing distress in the deacon's face until he laid his hand upon her arm. Then it was that she saw that there were tears upon his cheeks.

"Hush, Melissy, hush! For God's sake, hush!" He was obliged to take his handkerchief and wipe his eyes.

"What you 've told me is all new to me—before God." His right hand trembled visibly as he held it up to give force to his words.

"Yas; it 's as new to me as ef Heaven had jest revealed it; but, bless God, how happy it does make me feel! Talk about *respectin'* you! Why, honey, I would n't take all the money in Simpkinsville befo' the wah for what you 've confessed to me. It brings you in reach of me. For ten year I 've set an' contemplated you an' yore life, an' so far as I could scan it, it 's been perfect, an' they 's been times I 'd 'a'

give my head to see a flaw in you; an', bless Heaven, the time has come, an' I can speak. I could n't ask no perfec' woman to be my wife —an' me a poor mericle-doubtin', deef old sinner like I 've always been.

"I 've worshiped you, Melissy, honey, same as I 'd worship a saint, for over ten year; but no human man 's got a right to make love to a up-an'-down saint.

"But I can make love to you now, an' I 'm a-doin' it this minute. Any dear-hearted woman thet 's lived the life you 've lived, an' then, when she was put to it, had the grit to kick out o' the traces—"

He put his arm about her, as if she had been a child in distress, and drew her to him.

"Did you take notice thet I never said I liked the *color* o' them green mats, honey? Growin' things an' tree-frogs can have a monopoly o' that color for me, an' I don't wonder you got tired of it. But these red ones, they 've got jest enough o' the ole Nick in 'em to tickle me all over.

"We 'll set 'em on the mantel-shelf, an' they 'll illuminate the whole house."

Miss Melissa sat quite still and looked doubtfully into the deacon's face. His words did not satisfy her. He realized the

mats in their worst meaning, and yet he took pleasure in them. Her voice was almost reproachful when she said, after a while:

"You would n't want to illuminate the house with a reminder of my sinfulness, would you?"

"T ain't that, deary. It 'll be as a reminder of yo' humanness—that 's all."

"An' yet they 're the reverend còlor of *sin*, accordin' to Scripture. 'Though thy sins be—'"

"That 's only half o' the tex', honey."

"Yas; that 's so. 'Maybe it will be jest as well to keep 'em in sight. We 'll try to reelize the promise every time we look at 'em—'whiter than snow.' That-a-way they 'll be symbols of forgiveness."

"That cotation ain't 'whiter than snow,' honey. It's 'as white as snow,' an' it 's from the first chapter of the prophet Isaiah, eighteenth verse. You 're thinkin' about a psa'm verse. It 's the Fifty-first Psa'm, seventh verse,—seventh or eighth,—thet says 'whiter than snow.' Well, *you* can read the mats that-a-way, ef you like, but don't talk too much about it, now, lessen you 'll skeer me. I don't doubt you 're entirely too good for me, after all.

But, for better or for worse, you 're mine, from this time on through all eternity, lessen you cast me off.

"Even ef I was to wake up sudden an' find I 'd been dreamin' all this whole thing, I 'd set out to hunt you up an' co't you now—that is, ef I remembered *all* the dream."

"Which part do you mean?" She looked artlessly into his face as she asked it.

"Put on yo' guessin'-cap," he chuckled, as he tightened his arm about her and covered her hand with his.

"All scarlet ain't sin," he added, looking down upon her. "The side o' yo' neck an' yo' ear—don't turn away, now. It's perfectly lovely. But how did you git them little black freckles on yo' wrist?"

He had lifted her hand and was turning it over. "And how red it is! The right one ain't that-a-way."

"Them 's Sunday freckles," she said evenly. "You know, I 'm left-handed, an' that 's my fishin' hand. It 's been held over the water in the sun the livelong day. I wonder you dast to hold it."

"'T ain't no worse for me to hold yo' po little Sabbath-breakin' hand than for you to be a-listenin' to the words of my doubt-

expressin' tongue, is it?" he chuckled; but in a moment he added seriously:

"But they 's some precious truths I ain't never doubted, deary. I ain't never doubted the love of God, or the blessedness of livin' in Him, or the beauty of holiness.

"But,"—and now he chuckled again,—
"come down to it, it 's only these triffin' little one-day open-air freckles on yo' hand thet brings it where I can feel anyways eligible to it—that is, it 's what these dear little freckles express—God bless 'em! Seems to me you must freckle mighty easy, though."

"I always did. You know, I was sandy-haired befo' I—"

"You 're sandy-haired yet, deary. The prettiest sand on earth is the white sand o' the sea-shore. It 's whiter than snow, ef any-thing outside of a pure woman's soul is. But yo' hair ain't arrived at that stage, quite. They 's a plenty of the earthly sand-color in it yet, an' I 'm glad of it. Sand an' grit, you know, they 're pretty nigh the same thing. I like a woman thet 's got grit. It was mighty gritty the way you owned up to all you done, knowin' you 'd have to face the music alone.

"Oh, what a joy this day has brought me! Yas, indeed, we 'll put these red mats in sight,



“‘ARE YOU SHORE YOU DOUBT?’”

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an' they 'll be beacons to us both, each in a different way, maybe. An' nobody but you an' me an' the gate-post—'

"Which ole Si is as deaf as—"

"Will ever know the story of 'em. I 'm s'prised you was n't afeard of ole Si, though. They say he 's picked up a ole stovepipe hat somewhere, an' with it an' his dress-skirts an' boots—

"I would n't like to come on 'im sudden in the dusk myself. You know I offered him shelter, four year ago, in my barn; but he would n't have it. I don't wonder you thought I knew about yo' seein' him. Every time I opened my mouth to-night, seem like I put my foot in it, as the sayin' is.

"But do you reelize thet you ain't holdin' back from me none, an' thet I 'm keepin' my arm around you, straight along, an' I 'm a-takin' a heap o' things for granted?"

At this Miss Melissa withdrew herself; but she was not blushing, nor in any wise conscious or confused.

"It 's all so sudden," she said evenly, "seem like I can' quite git the straight of it. I feel like as ef the Apostle John had ast me to marry him, an' while I was holdin' off, half scared, he turned into Peter, an'—an'—"

"An' you give in to Peter?"

Her face was as red as the scarlet mat, but the deacon did not see it. Her voice betrayed her embarrassment somewhat, though, as she said, lowering her tone a little:

"I could take Peter easier 'n I could John. He would n't be sech a constant reproach to me. But you've been like John to me for so long—I can't hardly—"

She laid her hand upon his arm, and putting her lips close to his good ear, continued:

"Are you shore you doubt, in yo' heart of hearts, about Jonah an' the whale—an' it all stated clair in the Bible? You ain't jest makin' pretend, jest to encourage me?"

"Why, honey, I told you about that before I knew—"

"So you did. An' you're *shore* you doubt?"

"I'm afeard I am, beloved."

"Well, *ef you're shore*—maybe we can be a help to one another."

UNCLE STILL'S FAMOUS WEATHER PREDICTION



HEY called him "Uncle Still" on the plantation, because he was a silent man.

Still had been self-contained and ruminant ever since his childhood. Indeed, when he was a mere piccaninny, sitting apart from the other children and "mooning" while they romped in the fields, his mother had accredited him with "knowin' mo' 'n he let on," and his rare utterances as he grew older were such as to verify her claim for him.

When he was only a wide-eyed stripling, he was fond of walking alone in the woods or of throwing himself in the deep grass, where, with his hoe lying idle beside him, he would lay his ear against the earth and listen; and where another could discern only silence, the boy would report "heat-callin's," or "frost-warnin's," or "myriads callin' fer

rain," or "stiddy songs fer pleasant days," and those who watched him said that "his scent was true."

But, with all this, Still was a despiser of learning, and even in an environment where education was held in reverence, as a gift of Heaven reserved for the few and the free, he early declared himself an enemy to books.

"Book-knowledge!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "Why, hit ain't nothin' but secon'-han' wisdom, an', of co'se, fer *sech as can't read*, hit 's de bes' dey is. But fer humans wha' understan' sky an' fiel' pages an' woods books, an' kin see shut-eye wonders — *hit 's stale*."

This was one of his longest remembered speeches, delivered when he was a young man, and it went far to establish the reputation for "wisdoms" and "knowledges" (a plural store) that had followed him through life and set him apart in the popular regard as one who might with impunity live the life of idleness which he essayed.

At this period his favorite sport was fishing, and he was known to go day after day to a certain moss-grown projection overlooking a turn in the creek, and to sit there from early morning till nearly dark, when, if he

wanted fish, he would cross over to where the conditions were favorable, a stone's-throw away, and catch a string of perch in a few minutes. He knew they would n't bite at the first place, and he "went there a-purpose," because he "did n't want to be bothered"; and so, letting his line drift with the stream, he would become a part of the landscape and "watch an' listen in peace," as wide awake as the "black-eyed-Susans" at his elbow, but as still as the bank from which they sprang.

It would seem, from these and similar indications, that there had been somewhat of the poet in old Still in these his callow days; but, as has been the fate of many another of fairer promise, he began to grow fat before he had reached mid-life—not only fat, which is perhaps not *per se* a condition unfavorable to the poet's growth, but *fatty*, a word which, albeit it is an adjective and refuses to serve with grace, we must needs misfit for our purpose. To grow fatty is to degenerate hopelessly. Perhaps it is not the fattiness so much as the state of satisfaction that it induces that is so fatal to the best things. By the time Still was forty he was a soft, fat dreamer, who was apparently blandly content simply to endure.

"I feels best when I sets stock-still," was one of his characteristic declarations at this period, uttered in the presence of his good wife, who quickly added, in a tone of tender solicitude:

"Yas; an' de stiller you sets de stockier you gits."

Thirty years more or less had passed since then, and Uncle Still, the old man, continued to feel best when he was stillest, and his outward growths were those of breadth and serenity. No one knew definitely when his natural reticence had crystallized into the silence that had been broken in years only under great pressure that gave his utterances import beyond their abstract value, but it was probably about the time when he took permanently to his chair.

It seems fitting that a prophet should be a man of few words and many wisdoms, if he have faithful followers who wait upon his speech.

For about ten years, now, Still had sat from morn to night in the straight, splint-bottomed chair placed for him at sunrise by his good wife on the spot indicated by the silent direction of his right thumb. The index-finger may command on occasion, but

there is no gainsaying the peremptoriness of the pointing thumb.

'Tild' Ann was an obedient wife, and she was proud of her lord. Perhaps she loved him; but that was her business. Certain it is that her outward motions were those of devotion, and that is all the world has a right to require of a wife. It was one of her favorite boasts that he was one of the "mos' pompious an' bes'-dressed gen'lemens in de county," and when he took the chair she set for him daily it was her habit to give him a touch here and there, straightening his stock, or even, on occasion, tying his shoe for him, before she left him for her tubs, where it was her pleasure to earn a support sufficient for two.

Although he was supposed to have varied "knowledges" on subjects occult, and to see things invisible to others, Still's greatest reputation was for "weather-wisdom," and it was said that during all the years that he had occupied his chair he had never been surprised by weather that had compelled him to move. And when his wife would observe a neighbor coming to the turn of the road and peeping over the fence to see where he sat, she would chuckle softly to herself.

Still did not like the sun upon his head, neither did he like the rain in his face, and so, if he began the day in the open beyond the tree, it was safe for his neighbors to count upon a gray day. The hot rainless days of summer he spent beside his spouse at her wash-bench in the shade of the trees, while in a corner of the back shed he got the best there was for his lungs out of a day given over to a "stiddy drizzle." And so it was necessary only to discover where he sat to know the day's temper. Seeing him on the corner of the "gallery," even though the early morning was fine, his neighbors would feel safe in setting out tomato-plants or cabbages. Even the gardener at the great house had been seen to peep slyly over the fence before venturing to draw back the covers from his hotbeds. Thus it seems that 'Tild' Ann's was no idle claim when she boasted that as a weather-prophet her old man was "better 'n a woodsful o' tree-toads or a whole slough o' croakin' frogs [she pronounced it *sloo*], an' a million times mo' fur-seein' 'n deze heah vain weather-vanes wha' don't no mo' 'n 'nounce de win' arter it's done come," which last, at least, was certainly true.

But, even more than this, under pressure

of special petition the old man Still sometimes foretold weather as much as a week ahead; but in these cases his answers were given in pantomime, which it was the business of the "seekers" to interpret. But they were generally simple enough. A quick shiver, the buttoning or unbuttoning of his coat, the mopping of his forehead, or the rolling up of his trousers, were motions which even he who could n't run might read. Sometimes, however, his pantomime was more ambiguous, and so susceptible of several interpretations that before following any one of them the seeker thought it safe to take a survey of the weather and exercise a casting-vote based on personal judgment, which would obviously be strengthened by the prophet's indorsement in any case.

Although there were few of the younger set on the plantation who had ever heard the sound of the old man's voice, they were all familiar with his potent words as handed down to them, and the boy who had lain with his ear "ag'in' dead leaves to git live wisdom" had not, through the simple withdrawal of speech, lost an atom of his prestige. Indeed, his mysterious silence rather strengthened his position. It was almost uncanny to see

him sometimes, now, point with his thumb to a clump of grass that he wanted, and when it was brought, raise it between his eyes and the sun for a moment, pluck a blossom or a seed-pod and hold it to his ear, then throw the whole away and silently reach for his great palmetto fan or open his umbrella.

Sometimes, when the case was important, the seekers brought gifts to 'Tild' Ann. They began bringing them to the old prophet himself, but there is small satisfaction in giving to one who does not even blink his thanks; and as 'Tild' Ann was an engaging woman of warmth and words, whom it was a pleasure to please, and as she commanded the "right of way" to the prophet, she naturally became the recipient of what, in her wifely pride, she was pleased to call "Still's earnin's." And, for that matter, it was she, and not her silent lord, who, it was said, had "th'owed out de hint" by which the generous were encouraged in their offerings, her judgment in the matter being that "ef Still's prophecies is wuth anything, dey sho is wuth a pint o' milk or a couple o' fresh aigs," which seems a very moderate estimate of his powers.

When, on rare occasions, the old man had

had recourse to the spoken word,—presumably either because he could find no other medium, or for the sake of emphasis,—the monosyllable falling from his long-silent lips had reverberated through frequent repetitions to the remotest limits of his constituency, which is to say, the range of plantation circles within a radius of a dozen miles, more or less, in any direction bounded by river, swamp, or bayou.

“Uncle Still done spoke!”

“Ole Unc’ Still done spoke!”

“What he say?”

“Who heerd him?”

“He say ‘Git!’”

“Who he say ‘Git’ to?”

“He say ‘Git’ to ole Horse-steal Tyler, dat who he say it to.”

“He did, did he? An’ what ole Horse-steal Tyler do?”

“What he do? When Uncle Still say, ‘Git,’ why, he got, dat what he done! He jes cut out an’ run same as ef de devil was arter him. An’ he did n’t cut out none too quick, nuther. De sheriff purty nigh trod on his heel; but he did n’t ketch him!”

Such is a brief sketch of his last utterance and its sensational passage; and for this one

word of spirit, spoken in the nick of time, the good woman 'Tild' Ann enjoyed a rich harvest. Everybody who wished to know anything came and waited before the silent man, leaving a gratuity in her hand. It was surprising to find how many kinds of "knowledges" he really had, now that the day of full honor had come to him, and how many ways there were of telling things without speech. He even knew about all the babies who were predestined to appear during the year; not only that, but whether they would arrive singly or gregariously, by twos or even threes. This precise information, however, was just the sort of thing that he discreetly withheld from every one, it would seem, excepting his good wife; and she, being no meddler in things that did not concern her, did no more than innocently remark after the events had occurred: "I could 'a' tol' you dat las' summer"—a harmless little wifely weakness that, in adding to her good man's reputation, helped to boil the family pot.

As is a way with modern prophecies, the very strength of Uncle Still's utterances seemed sometimes to lie in their ambiguity. For example, when he took from his pocket

a nut and handed it to Lily Belvedere when she came, a bride, seeking foreknowledge. and she opened it in the presence of her friends, to find within it a double kernel,—otherwise a philopena,—the inference seems plain enough, and a more astute woman than she, having faith in her prophet, would have been forgiven for “sewing for two,” as she did, during the year following. But when, along about Christmas, there arrived at her cabin a single brown boy-child, she would have denounced the old man as a charlatan, had not the granny who dressed the babe called her attention to the double crown upon his head, which, manifestly, was an answer to the prediction of the philopena symbol, and indicated that hers was no common child.

All the plantation folk know that two crowns on one head indicate a double mentality and gifts of sight as pronounced as those of such as are “born with a caul,” and whose vision is not in the least disturbed by so trifling interpositions as stone walls, black darknesses, or infinite distance, and whose only drawback is, perhaps, an occasional embarrassment in a loss of perspective and space-values, through the equal clearness with which all things are seen.

For instance, seeing a woman and a bull in a field, each in perfectly distinct outline, such a one might not instantly be sure whether he was seeing the woman through the bull or the bull through the woman, and for catastrophe-averting action, which must needs be swift, the sure snap-shot of the eyes of common mortals has its value. There is an embarrassment in perfection, in a condition distinguished by limitations.

But, speaking of Lily and the philopena prediction, she was so pleased over it that when her babe was a month old she brought him to see the old man, bearing a gift of tobacco in his little fist. Carefully drawing back the tight kinks, she proudly exhibited the double whorl of hair which grew upon his head as if it had started from two points. The prophet took no notice of it apparently, or of her either, until she turned to go, when, reaching down into his pocket, he produced a handful of nuts, and carefully selecting one, laid in her hand a second philopena, and she went home wondering.

Christmas was always a week long on the plantation, which is to say that the annual dance on Christmas eve was but an ushering in of a series of festivities that never

flagged until New Year's night. To "come and spend Christmas" is even yet an invitation for the week, in the best of plantation life above the quarters, in many communities.

At Christmas-time of the year of the memorable freeze that killed all the orange-trees in old man Fortier's back yard in the month of April, it was too warm to dance on the bayou on Christmas eve, and so the usual ball was, by unanimous voice, deferred until "the last day of Christmas" instead of the first. It seemed certain that the overdue cold snap would put in an appearance before that time, and the people would feel more in the mood for it. Besides, as the crop had been an unusually good one, the hands were promised a rendering of accounts a day earlier than usual, so that, knowing the exceptional balances to their credit, they might enter the New Year "with their heads up." It would be a dancing season in more senses than one.

The Christmas dance in the sugar-house was usually an occasion of romantic culminations, anyway; for such of the young men as foresaw a creditable reckoning on the 1st of January were emboldened to speak final words at the dance, and it was no uncommon thing for more than one long-pending engage-

ment to be "purnounced" before the dance was over.

On the night before New Year's eve of the year of the freeze it was still hot, and inside the cabins there were mosquitos thick around the candles. Outside, the conditions were little better, but there was a white moon above, and the ground was dry and firm. Outside were mosquitos, too, but really, in Louisiana, the people do not care much about mosquitos. It would n't pay to care. If they cared at all, they would have to care too much, for they are a pest and a plague, and should have been mentioned, one would think, in the Book of Job.

Next morning it would be time to prepare for the dance, to bring evergreens from the woods, and Spanish moss, and palmettos, and to hang the "s'ciety banners" about. Of course, now that the last day had arrived, the dance must come off "whe'r or no." Those who would n't dance out Christmas and the old year at the same time, "heat or no heat," might "set aroun' an' look on," but the ball would come off "shore."

Next morning it was warmer than ever. It really seemed silly for such as were driven out of their cabins by the heat and sat fanning themselves on their door-steps at eight

o'clock in the morning to be arranging an indoor dance for that night. It was Apollo Belvedere, the little yellow fiddler, Lily's husband, who first said it was silly, and that, for his part, he thought the most sensible thing would be to have the dance in the grove instead, and to hire the Chinese lanterns from the white Baptists, who had bought them for their missionary pound-party, and charged only two dollars for the use for a night of the entire two hundred.

Apollo had been somewhat reticent about the Christmas dance this year from the first. The truth, which he did not in the least realize and would honestly have denied, was that he was jealous of whomever should be the belle at the dance this year. His Lily had reigned supreme for the last four seasons, and he could not bear the thought of another's dancing down the line of her recent triumphs.

Lily was handsomer than ever the day she stepped into the road with Apollo, Jr., upon her arm, and she would have been quite as ready now to dance her slippers off, as she had done last year; but mothers of babies are not expected to "lead off" in the dance at plantation functions.

But she could top the crowd in the lantern-

lit grove, and so he pictured her stepping proudly about and passing her baby around from one to another to be admired until he should fall asleep and be handed over to his daddy, who would cover him over with his coat on a bench beside him and let him "git used to sleepin' by dance-music." It was a fond paternal fancy, and in his enjoyment of it Apollo felt that he was employing his best part, which was probably true.

There was much that was attractive in the scheme, much beyond the novelty of an outdoor dance at New Year's, that appealed to everybody. All the committeemen and the floor manager approved of it, "ef—" There was a big "if" in the case, and it was about the weather. Supposing it should rain? It was likely to, at almost any moment, no matter if the sky was clear, while the temperature was so high. They dare not make preparations without some assurance of fair weather. With this, and a full moon, there would be nothing finer than the dance in the grove, and it was at this juncture that Apollo bethought himself of Uncle Still.

In half an hour he had presented himself before 'Tild' Ann, armed with one of Lily's best custard-pies (purloined from her cup-

board). He laid it beside 'Tild' Ann's tub on the wash-bench, with the compliments of the season from "Mr. Apollo Belvedere, Jr." Then, respectfully taking off his hat and holding it behind him, he went and stood before the man of "wisdoms," while he opened his case.

"Howdy, Unc' Still, howdy, sir?" he began. "I 'm pleased to see you settin' outside de portals o' yo' residence dis mornin', kaze we-all on de dance an' ban' committees is petitionin' fer a continuation o' summer an' a smilin' moon. Seem like ef we could dance under a clair firmamint, an'—an' put out de flags an' lanterns under de trees to light up de path, whiles de ladies toe it by twos down de cedar row, an' de gemmen sachey roun' de poplars on each side, an' meet 'em one by one, an' s'lute pardners bias-ways, right an' lef', an' swing corners back to de Cherokee hedge,—all by de light o' de moon on high, answered by de paper lanterns below."

Apollo was an eloquent fellow, and while his enthusiasm bore him bravely along he watched the old man's face for a sign.

"So I say ef we had de encouragemint o' wisdom to put out de banners an' lanterns—"

"Put out yo' lanterns!"

The interruption was so sudden and unexpected, and the voice so sepulchral and remote, that Apollo fell back as if he had been shot, tumbling over two sleeping dogs behind him; and when they waked, barking, 'Tild' Ann was so startled that she tilted her starch-tub over on her feet and nearly choked on the piece of pie she had in her mouth.

Before she could recover herself, Apollo had darted through the gate with both dogs after him, and she could see only the top of his hat, which he waved in the air as he ran, shouting: "Unc' Still done spoke! He say put out de lanterns! Put out de lanterns!"

It was a festive and effective scene in the grove that night—long strings of lanterns festooned from tree to tree, and the laden refreshment-table decorated with yards upon yards of green tarlatan hired with the lanterns, with banners bearing the various society mottos hung where they would best catch the light; and the girls, dressed mostly in white, with their polished dark arms and necks shining through, walking arm in arm with loftily groomed, strutting fellows in rusty broadcloth with "buttonhole bo'quets," and chaffing one another in "company language" as they "promenaded."

While Apollo stood aside tuning his fiddle, he took in the picture and mentally hugged himself for planning it all; for although the girls were radiant and Lily had a new position among them, he realized, as she towered above them all with the child upon her arm, that it was no secondary place.

Lily was a stately brown Juno, and as she passed among the lesser women, wearing her last year's white dress let out in the seams for her glorification, she dignified the whole assembly; and her little yellow husband knew it well.

He knew it so well that even while he dashed off waltz and polka measures from his bow, he always realized exactly in what part of the grounds she and the wee yellow baby were, and once, when they passed quite near and Lily took the baby's hand and waved it to his "daddy," he was so happy that he missed his time for a minute and was obliged to stop and feign a sneeze to explain it; and when a companion laughingly asked if he sneezed because he was warm, he answered: "Yas; I allus sneezes when I'm warm."

"You does! Dat's mighty funny."

"'T ain't no funnier 'n you is."

"How is I funny?"

"You so ogly till you purty. Dat's how!"

So they chaffed each other till Apollo, having recovered himself, struck up again, and the dance went on.

Nearly everybody on the place had "turned out" to see the grove lighted up, even many of the old people, who had not appeared at the sugar-house dances for years, coming and taking back seats to look on.

The moon had risen round and fair soon after the dancing had begun, and the night was almost as white as day; but it was hot. It was so hot that, as old man Cæsar expressed it, the "air cracked," and at intervals there was a suspicious twinkle overhead late in the evening—a twinkle that was felt rather than seen, as if the sky were blinking. Old man Still noticed it as he sat within his cabin window, and so did 'Tild' Ann, and it made her nervous, but she said nothing. Neither said he anything. He had not gone to the dance because he never went anywhere, except occasionally to church. He went to church to enrich his mental vocabulary—so 'Tild' Ann said, though not in these exact words. "To git book-words to think in" was her way of putting it. And she boasted, too, that, when he did go, he could "look de

preacher out o' countenance whenever he saw him drawin' it too strong"—a valuable man to have in a congregation.

'Tild' Ann had stayed away from the dance because she was afraid to go. If all the signs she had learned to depend on during nearly half a century of life with the hitherto infallible prophet counted for anything, it would rain to-night, and rain hard. She had even felt it herself in her left shoulder-blade all day, and would have forsaken her tubs at any other time than this. Of course she had been obliged to get all her wash out and the things sent home on this last day. Otherwise she could not hope ever to feel that her work was done during the entire coming year, for clothes in suds on New Year's day mean clothes in suds the long year through. All the plantation people know this.

When she saw the play of light along the sky coming at shortening intervals, and presently heard a low sound as of rumbling thunder, she could stand it no longer, and she rose from her seat, lighted a candle, and went up to her husband and scanned his face.

"Is you los' yo' fo'sight, or what?" she whispered; but seeing that he only spat out

of the window, she took courage and went back to her place on the door-step, and tried to enjoy the music of the string-band and the calling of the figures as they came distinctly to her from the grove.

The clock had scarcely finished striking twelve, it being just three minutes after "the turn o' the night," and the drums and bugles and loud cries of "Happy New Year!" and "Hands all roun'!" were still in the air, when the downpour came.

To the few who had been watching without it was no great surprise, though the last signs had come with a rush; but to the dancers it seemed as if the moon had been suddenly snuffed out, and before they could turn around to see who had done it, the rain was in their faces, and in a minute the whole place was sopping wet, and it was as "dark as Egypt."

There was nothing to do but to run blindly for shelter, which they did, most of them taking refuge in the sugar-house.

Of course the supper was soaked and spoiled, nor was this the worst of it. When, after a while, its sodden remains were brought in, they were found to be all mixed up in the wet meshes of the tarlatan, that had dyed

everything a vivid green, which everybody knows is "rank pizen," and not even fit for dogs.

If it had not been so hopelessly warm there might have been a resurrection of joy and a revival of festivities in the sugar-house even yet. There would be five hours' good dancing before daybreak. Even as it was, there were several young men and a few of the girls who wished to "keep it up," but everybody knew how it was with them. This was to have been their "fatal night," and they had n't managed to "git ingaged" yet. Consequently they did not know that it was not freezing cold, or that they were soaking wet.

No doubt the young people made the most of their misfortune, and it is possible that they discovered that taking a girl home in the rain, "totin' her shoes in their hands," or perhaps carrying her bodily over the "washes," was almost as favorable to the speaking of last words as is the promenade between dances or the seat in the shadowed corner of the sugar-house.

Certainly there was nothing to do but to go home now, and home they went, nearly all laughing, but a few in no happy frame of

mind. Apollo was probably the most unhappy of them all. It had not occurred to him that the old man's prophecy might fail until the rain descended and the floods came, and he was almost dazed over it all yet. While they waited under shelter for the rain to subside, the men were gathered in groups that soon became indignation meetings. They had been betrayed, and the more they discussed it the more angry they grew. Old man Still *was* an old man, it was true, but so much more reason was there why he should have known better than to amuse himself at their expense, as he had apparently done. Certainly Apollo's story was straight. He had asked for advice, and he had gotten it in the most unequivocal form—"by word of mouth." Of course they could n't punish the old man, but neither would they pass it over. All the Baptist lanterns were reduced to little more than pulp, and *somebody* would have to pay for them. After all, the question soon resolved itself into that of fixing this responsibility.

There was a good deal of strong language wasted before they separated, but it was really too hot to think much about anything. The belated winter arrived in the night, and in

the light of a winter sun next morning the waste in the grove looked even worse than they had realized it to be. Apollo had risen early and strolled over with his hands in his pockets and his "thinking-cap" on, to see how things looked; and when the men came out he had a proposition ready for them. It was this:

Inasmuch as he had been the bearer of their petition for advice, and they had met disaster through his report, he "wanted things claired up," and so he "motioned"—showing that his conception of the matter was a formal one—he motioned that a committee be appointed to wait upon Uncle Still and to demand of him some sort of "satisfaction." All who felt themselves specially injured in the matter should be free to attend the "case," and to state their grievances and to demand redress. They could at least "git jedgment," which was "satisfaction" if it was n't anything more.

The scheme was attractive, but it was hard to arouse any available enthusiasm in it. Everybody said yes, but no one offered to be one of the committee. They were afraid of the old man Still. Apollo, standing boldly in the redoubt of injured innocence, was the

only man who had no fear in the matter. He argued bravely and at length, but to no purpose. Then, suddenly firing, he declared that since no one would go with him, he would go alone—dog-gone ef he would n't. He would go, and he would take Lily and the baby with him and make them show how they had suffered. Old man Still should see the limp remains of Lily's ruffled dress and "listen at little 'Pollo wheeze," yas, he should. He was n't "afeard to talk up to him," and if anybody wanted to come an' listen, they were welcome.

After thus declaring himself, he hurried home, and when about noon he started down the road with Lily carrying the baby beside him, half a dozen of the older men, repenting their timidity, joined him, and a number of women fell into line, giggling and shoving one another as they went. Most of these dropped out, however, afraid to incur the odium of appearing before the old man in an unfriendly attitude.

Apparently the news of the intended visit had preceded them, for when they arrived at the cabin, 'Tild' Ann sat dressed in her Sunday best beside her lord, and she had drawn all her chairs in a circle before the fire.



"APOLLO TRIED TO SPEAK, BUT HE COULD NOT."

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Evidently she was expecting company, and wished to make them welcome.

Apollo, who headed the line, hastened to decline seats for his entire escort, however, and, standing behind one of the chairs, while they distributed themselves back of the others, he cleared his throat and began :

"Howdy, Uncle Still? Howdy, Aunt 'Tild' Ann? I see you bofe high an' dry dis morn-in', an' I wush you a happy New Year. Howsomever, I come wid a complaint. I hates to say de word, but I come wid a complaint o' jestice ag'in' you, Uncle Still. Yas sir, I say it ag'in, I is de bearer of a complaint f'om all de committees ag'in' you. It's either you or me, one, dat 's 'sponsible for all dat nasty mess out in de grove dis morn-in', an' I know it ain't *me*."

As he spoke, 'Tild' Ann rose, stepped a little in advance of her husband, and taking her position, as Apollo had done, behind a chair, she faced him squarely. Seeing her rise, Apollo politely inclined his head, and she began :

"Will you have de kindness to state yo' case, Mr. Belvedere? A wife is a helpmeet, an' helpmeets has to be moufpieces when de occasion requi'es. State yo' case, an' I will attemp' to answer you."

The exceeding formality of this made it interesting. She had held Apollo in her arms when he was a baby, and her addressing him as "Mr. Belvedere" was "going him one better" at his own game. The audience were all impressed. Some of the women were so nervous that they heard their own hearts beat, and the men settled back to listen as if they had been in court. But Apollo was in no wise disconcerted; there was too much at stake.

"Well, Aunt 'Tild' Ann," he replied, as he had begun, "dis is de voice of my complaint, an' when I speak, I speak fer all who put dey trus' in Uncle Still las' night. Hit would be a prodigum waste o' words fer me to state dat I has allus had de utmos' respec' fer Uncle Still's wisdoms an' knowledges which he has showed fo'th f'om time to time. I don't haf to refer no further back 'n to de top of my baby's double-crown head to prove dat. When I come heah a-seekin' 'istiddy mornin', I b'lieved in 'im."

While he spoke, the old man Still did not wink. Although somewhat back of his wife, he sat facing his accuser; but he might have been calmly surveying the moon through Apollo for any sign he gave of realizing his presence.

"Yas," Apollo repeated, "I trusted in 'im. An' when I passed his word on, eve'body trusted in 'im, an' what has come to pass? In place o' reapin' de reward o' faith, we ain't nothin' but—nothin' but a slopped-up laugh-in'-stock in de eyes o' de white Baptists—dat what we is!"

Several grunts of approval came from behind Apollo here. He was doing well.

"When I come a-seekin' insight," he went on, "I knowed de elemints looked mighty *superfluous* an' onsettled, an' I was weak in faith. All I petitioned Uncle Still was to answer one single little question, an' look like he mought 'a' gimme a straight answer. All I craved to know was what de elemints was a-fixin' to do—"

"An' what did he say?" 'Tild' Ann asked bravely.

"What did he say? He say, 'Put out yo' lanterns,' jes as plain as I'm a-sayin' it now."

"An' did n't de elemints put 'em out?"

The voice came from behind her, and for a single moment 'Tild' Ann lost her composure. She turned and faced her lord, but it was with him as if he had not spoken.

And now a light came into her eyes.

When she turned to her guests again, her

face was quite serene, but there was a note of triumph in her voice, and her eyes shone with the light of victory, as she said :

"Dat what I say. Ef de elemints ain't put out yo' lanterns, I—I don' know no better way to say it."

Apollo tried to speak, but he could not. He knew himself vanquished by a quibble, but, for the life of him, he could not see just where it was.

Before he could recover his bearings and find a word, everybody was screaming with laughter. This roused Lily's spirit. In a single stride she stepped forward and took the floor. With a quick shifting of her arm for greater freedom, she even relegated the infant Apollo to a secondary place upon her hip, as she said :

"Sence you informs me dat helpmeets is moufpieces, I reckon I kin put in. All I got to say is dis :

"When 'Pollo fetched de word o' prophecy, seem like he fetched it straight, an' look like it 's a pity some o' you-all grayheads did n't have de sense to read it.

"I sho does hope dat befo' I gits to be ole as you is, I 'll know how to 'stinguish de diffence 'twix' a prophet an' a lawgiver.

"Come on, 'Pollo, an' tote dis heavy chile o' yourn home, an' give deze gemmen time to pass de hat roun' an' raise dat white-Baptis' money."

She put the baby into her husband's arms as she spoke, and, with her head high in air, strode out of the door; but when they were in the road, she actually held her sides and swayed with laughter, as she said:


"Seem like you ain't much of a prophecy-reader, is you, ole man?"

"Well, I sesso, too," Apollo chuckled. "Howsomever, Lily, honey, seem like you ain't perzac'ly de one to th'ow it up to me, is yer? Yit, 'n' still, sence you done argified de case so powerful, of co'se I ain't gwine th'ow nothin' up to yer, but I was jes a-study-in'—"

"What is you studyin', I like to know?"

"Nothin' in p'tic'lar. I was jes a-thinkin' dat maybe you mought sell out dat secon' set o' baby clo'es to raise some o' de money to pay fer dem white-Baptis' lanterns. Fer Gord sake, look at little 'Pollo laughin'! I 'clare fo' gracious, I b'lieve he onderstan' de joke."

PICAYUNE: A CHILD STORY

 PICAYUNE STEVE, familiarly called Picayune,—age anywhere from twenty to thirty-five,—stood four feet one in his bare feet. At least, measured against the door-frame, these were the figures. But Steve objected to being measured against the door-frame. He said it “wa’ n’t fair,” and when it is seen that a twine measurement from the top of his woolly head following the outer curve of his bow-legs raised the pencil-mark fully ten inches—well, perhaps Steve was right.

He was no doubt right as to the divine intention concerning himself; and the second-hand trousers which clad his curved nether limbs were witnesses for the defense whenever he was charged with the lesser altitude—witnesses, indeed, which Steve had more than once been known to produce to his own discomfort, taking them off and standing in

nature's chocolate-colored enameling, while the friendly garments stretched carefully upon the floor gave their elevating testimony.

This novel performance consisted in first measuring the trousers and then his own body from the waist-line upward, adding the results. By this mathematical process, indeed, Steve had been known to gain as many as eighteen inches—but then he had cheated. The chalk-line he drew upon his own body indicated a waist unduly long, while the trousers, descending from a corpulent first wearer, were deep in the crotch, and aspired nearly to his armpits, so that the space of several inches was thus twice reckoned.

Another advantage Steve always claimed was that his bushy hair should not be pushed down. "My hair is myse'f," he would protest, "des as much as any yether part o' me. How kin any man be counted tall when he's cheated at bofe ends dat-a-way?" And so Steve tried to "get even" by cheating in the middle.

When questioned in regard to his height, as he constantly was, he would reply: "Well, I ranges various, 'cordin' to fairness an' ca'culation. *When I gits my rights*, I 'm 'long about six foot."

Though born long after the close of the Civil War, Steve had always lived with his mother's former mistress, to whom she had tacitly given him.

Violet, his mother, had been rather a notorious woman in her day, a day, indeed, that though visibly waning, was not yet over. There were now living about the country several portly women of various complexions who referred to her as "mammy," and in these daughters, although it was a notable fact that she could live with none of them, she had always taken especial pride.

They all wore gilt shoes and clocked stockings, lived without work, "asked nobody any odds," and were "in good and regular standing in the churches."

What could fond mother ask for more?

But Steve—poor little black, bow-legged, simple-minded Steve, her last-born ugly duckling—could count for naught in her estimate of life and its values, and so she had formally cast him out.

And then she had gone her own gait, untrammelled by family ties, whither nobody seemed to know or to care.

When first she had deserted Steve at the homestead door, the fading garment of ante-

bellum ease still lay loosely about the old place.

It had never been one of the great estates, and its proprietors, plain, honest folk of the class commonly damned as "estimable" by their more pretentious neighbors, had laid no claim to aristocracy. Still, when in a few years the plantation passed from its widowed owner into new hands, it left her possessed of traditions that, so far as they went, were equal to the best—traditions of affluence as expressed in bountiful living, open doors and stables, and a retinue of lazy, happy-go-lucky servants, underworked and overfed; traditions held in common with such as add to the list a certain degree of culture, travel, social discrimination, and world-wisdom.

Now the old house was painted anew. New people occupied it. New methods had set the old sugar-house panting to a quicker breath.

Old lady Trowland never realized that much of the picturesque charm had passed out with the passing of the old régime. She realized simply that she had been rich and was now very poor, and that, meagerly equipped, she must face the world alone.

When, at the very last, the crowd of house-servants had disbanded, little Steve—ugly, deformed, incapable of work—was alone unclaimed, uncared for.

Here was at least one definite heritage descending from the old life—an inheritance of responsibility; and as such it had a certain dignity.

And thus it was that when finally the pale, black-gowned woman passed out the front gate, down the avenue of tall cedars guarding the walk, little Steve toddled grotesquely beside her.

Again, as so often in life, Tragedy and Comedy walked hand in hand.

The change of home was a simple one, and the short journey to the former overseer's cottage—"a little piece down the road"—was taken on foot.

For several years before she left the "great house" the mistress had taken in a little sewing, "having so much time and nothing to do" when the war was over and the men of her family had not come back to her. It was in this way, indeed, that she had earned the little ready money necessary for the lubrication of the prevailing credit system of the county. But now that there was

not even any ostensible security, of course this had also to pass, and the small sign that soon appeared within a window-pane of her sitting-room, facing the public road, was, to him who read it aright, a pathetic epitome of the situation. "Sewing for Cash." Such was its modest announcement. The "cash," it is true, was in this case a variable commodity, ranging from fractional currency to "frying-sized chickens," or small pails of wild berries gathered from the roadside, or bags of potatoes or Indian meal. Sometimes it was even strained to mean service,—wood-chopping, washing, or scouring,—in which cases payment was cheerfully offered in advance.

Steve could do little to help, but he could do something. He could pick up chips, light fires, draw out basting-threads. Better than this, he could talk and he could sing, and was light of heart and merry. But still best in the situation, he needed care.

Summer after summer in the long afternoon Steve played outside the door with the other plantation children; for to such as he life is but a prolonged childhood. He had long ago been nine years old, and he would practically never be any older.

As was natural, boy-nature being what it is, Steve was somewhat a butt among the youth of his own color, and, indeed, there were many times when he was constrained to appeal to his protector to defend him against them.

"Mis' Annie! *oh*, Mis' Annie!" he would call from the playground. "I wush-t you 'd step out heah ter deze boys! Dey a-devilin' me ag'in! Say my legs makes O every-time I puts my foots togedder, an' when I crosses 'em, dey holler 'X!'

"An' darin' me to head off chickens, an' dey know I can't head off nothin' lessen it 's too big ter run th'ough. An'—an' dey axin' me if my pants is cut out wid a circular saw —an'—an'—an'—"

His complaint, once flowing, would generally continue to pour itself out until "Mis' Annie" would appear at the door, from which, with a mild reproof, she would disperse the crowd, and Steve would hobble indoors. Then, while he returned to his basting-threads, he would fall to moralizing in the following innocent fashion:

"Mis' Annie, you know some'h'n?" So he began, one day, while he mechanically wound the long basting-threads upon a "pewee stick" for a second using. "You know ,

some'h'n, Mis' Annie? Ef—er—I had a baby—I declare, lis'n at me a-talkin' about havin' a baby, an' I ain't even to say married, much lessen havin' no baby—but ef I *was* to have a baby, an' anybody 'd stan' it on its foots an' make it loney 'fo' its time, I 'd—I 'd purty nigh bus' his head open, *dat I would!*”

The virile wrath expressed in this volley was a supreme effort of Steve's arrested manhood.

“Why, Stevie,” his mistress replied, “I thought you liked the nice curved legs that God gave you?”

“So I does! So I does, Mis' Annie! Kaze I knows 't ain't *eve'body* dat 's *got* legs like I is, and I knows dey 's *p'intedly special*, and I knows dey got a double-hinge back action to 'em, too, an' all dat. But you see, my baby—des a-s'posin', Mis' Annie—s'posin' he mought not like deze heah circumf'ence legs. (Dat 's what de new boss calls 'em, an' I think it sounds a heap purtier 'n des common bow-legs.) Heap o' folks is bow-legged; but fer reg'lar circumf'ence legs, de new boss he say I ought to have my picture tooken an' put into a book. You reckon anybody 'd put my picture in a book, Mis' Annie,—black like I is,—an' no purtier 'n dis?”

“Why, certainly, Stevie. Your color

would n't have anything to do with it, I am sure. Would you like to have your picture go into a book?"

"Yas, 'm, indeedy! I reckon I would! But you know what I'd like to do? Des de minute dey 'd git a snap at me, I'd crave to rise up straight an' high on my foots, des ter see how I'd look. I often wushes I could h'ist myself good *des once-t*, till I could prove dat top mark on de do'-sill."

"Yes; but maybe if you were to straighten up, you could n't get down again—and—"

"An' maybe it's a sin ter say it, Mis' Annie," he interrupted eagerly, "but I would n't keer much ef I could n't. I drempt one night I straightened out my legs an' could n't twis' 'em back ag'in, an' 't was n't sech a bad dream, nuther."

"But think how much fun you 'd lose, Steve," so proceeded his gentle comforter. "You could n't play circus for the boys. Remember, you are the only fellow they have who can scratch his ears with his toes, or put the soles of his feet together and rock like a cradle. And then, too, if you had straight, strong legs, maybe you would run away and leave me, and I would be so lonely. I would n't have a nice little servant-boy to draw out my

bastings and run the sewing-machine treadle for me with his strong, willing hands when my feet are tired."

"Um—hm! No, ma'am! I would n't leave you, Mis' Annie. Did you think I stayed wid you on de 'count o' my bow-legs? I would n't think o' nothin' else but to stay wid you, not ef I had a million legs."

So little Steve, unconsciously confessing his utter dependence, when he meant only to avow his loyalty, would forget his wrongs so completely that at a first signal from the boys he would give an answering whistle and bound out again so fast that sometimes in his eagerness he would lift both feet together, they would cross, and down he would tumble upon his face, to the hilarious delight of the waiting crowd, who would gleefully bear him away upon their shoulders; and he might presently be seen perched upon a barrel, going through his antics for the amusement of his tormentors.

The coming of a visitor to the plantation was frequently the occasion of a special exhibition, when Steve would "perform" with more or less ardor according to the enthusiasm or apparent importance of the guest.

Steve's reputation as a funny little perform-

ing freak had gone abroad through his own and adjacent counties, and as there was nothing repulsive in his simple child-face or his absurdly nimble nether limbs, his "shows" were always regarded as good fun.

It was perhaps the glitter of a brilliant scarf-pin upon the breast of an unexpected visitor, at one of these impromptu performances, that inspired Steve to his best effort on a certain memorable occasion which proved the turning-point in his life.

When the show was over the strange guest of the jeweled pin put a silver dollar into the toddling performer's little palm, and, engaging him in conversation, accompanied him home.

He had heard of the boy, and had come many miles to see him. And now he wanted him.

There was money in Picayune Steve's "double-j'inted, back-action circumf'ence legs"—money for the "Golden Star Museum, America's Greatest Collection of Living Wonders," in New York city, money for Steve.

Old lady Trowland had all a provincial woman's horror of everything connected with stage life, and although her poor protégé had proven himself impervious to learning, hav-

ing barely mastered the intricacies of the wary alphabet after fourteen years of patient teaching, still she feared lest he should prove normally susceptible to vice.

All his life she had guarded him against contaminating influences, her one fear being that he would "go to the bad," though by what circuitous route his crooked little legs would carry him there she had never asked herself.

It is true that many of her prejudices against the stage life were quickly dispelled by Mr. Steinberger's assurance that the institution which he had the honor to represent was conducted strictly in the interest of science and religion, and differed from such as the Smithsonian in Washington, for instance, only in exhibiting living instead of defunct marvels.

This invested his proposition with a certain dignity, no doubt, and yet certain it is that if it had come at any other time than the present it would have been unhesitatingly rejected. But the old lady had been feeling ill of late. A numbness often made her busy fingers "all thumbs" as she sewed, and she would sometimes drop her needle for no cause whatever; and occasionally she woke suddenly

over her work, not remembering when she had fallen asleep. Upon her death, Steve must go to his mother or sisters or to the poorhouse. Any one of these alternatives meant neglect and vicious associations, if not abuse.

She would think it over. She had not failed to note with pleasure that during his conversation Mr. Steinberger had ventured to hope that she would not object to Steve's attending Sunday-school in company with other members of his company—Sunday-school, and the sacred concerts which were open to all worshipers on Sabbath afternoon.

The museum was situated—?

Oh, no; not in a wicked street. Certainly not; but in the Bowery, which from its very name—

No, it was not exactly a part of Central Park. It was much smaller, quieter—"in every way more elevated. In fact, de elevated tone pervades de untire Powery—tay und night."

This was one of Mr. Steinberger's stock jokes, actually perpetrated at his burlesque Sunday-school performances; but he dared to risk it here, and old lady Trowland, as she sat in her little parlor resting her elbow on a

well-worn copy of "Alexander's Evidences of Christianity," only smiled at the quaintness of her guest's English, as she naïvely remarked that she "presumed that Mr. Steinberger's own family were Lutherans."

"Orichinally," was the laconic reply, uttered in a pious voice.

And then he added: "But dey don't shtuck to it so close-t no more. Dey are wery liperal."

THE end is not difficult to see.

It was soon noised abroad that Picayune Steve was going out into the great world.

And so, in due time, a little sole-leather trunk—the best the house afforded—was packed with a full and comfortable wardrobe, which his benefactress supplied from her slender purse at a definite cost of comfort to herself.

In her sentiment toward her pitiful little protégé, old lady Trowland unconsciously reversed the old legend of the jewel in the toad's head. She had loved to think of this poor little "*crapaud noir*"—so he was often playfully called along the coast—as transfigured into a possible jewel which she might one day wear in her own heavenly crown, if,

by God's grace, she might be the humble means of making his "calling and election sure."

There were marked passages in the New Testament of large print which she laid on the very top of the clothing in his trunk—passages so simple that the wayfaring man, though a fool, might not err therein. This little book Mr. Steinberger pressed to his heart while he promised that it should be read to the boy every day.

Steve's triumphant departure was a great event on the plantation, and when at last, sitting beside his resplendent patron, the small boy drove down the public road, there was a great farewell shout from the assembled crowd of black fellows about the gate, many of whom would, no doubt, in the exhilaration of the moment, have been happy to change legs with him for his precarious journey.

News travels fast, even on a Southern plantation. During the few days while Mr. Steinberger waited for Steve to be made ready, the report of the boy's prospective honors had spread abroad, and as the carriage passed the plantations lying on either side the road en route to the station, there were crowds wait-

ing by the wayside to see it, and to hurl after it their blessing, prodigally expressed in handfuls of rice and old shoes.

Steve was beginning to know himself for a celebrity already, even before he had reached the depot and where he found himself the hero of a most sensational little drama.

It was nearly train-time when he and Mr. Steinberger arrived at the station, and the prospective passengers stood laden with their small luggage upon the platform beside the rail, awaiting the train.

Mr. Steinberger had bought tickets and was stepping out with the others, Steve toddling beside him, when from a plantation wagon that rattled up to the landing a huge colored woman alighted, and before any one realized her intention, she had rushed up to the poor bewildered boy, clasped him to her bosom, and begun to shriek aloud:

“Who dis gwine rob me of my blessed chile! Gimme my flesh an’ blood! Can’t nobody take my baby out en my bosom lessen—”

Steve was pretty heavy to be carried in the arms, and as the hysterical woman had actually lifted him from the ground, she soon found herself breathless and panting, and

from sheer exhaustion she dropped upon one of the benches, still holding the boy against her breast.

Steve had not laid his eyes upon his fond parent for several years, and she had about doubled in weight in the interval, but he recognized her, and, childlike, he began to cry.

The train was in sight. Steve's ticket was bought, his trunk checked.

Mr. Steinberger was a man of business and he was quick of vision. At the beginning of the little scene between mother and son he had only looked askance and pressed his forefinger upon his nose, but a second glance at the woman changed his relation to the affair. He stepped quickly back ten paces or such a matter and scrutinized her, shifted his position and examined her again from the new point of view, and then, after rushing to her for a few whispered words, he proceeded to buy a third ticket and to secure a handful of checks for the numerous bundles in the wagon in which she had come.

The mother, whose love would not brook the threatened separation from her offspring, had come prepared to follow him.

No one will ever know whether it was a subsequent discovery or whether he had realized

her full value on sight, but it was only after Mr. Steinberger had safely bestowed mother and son within the day-coach, and found his own seat in the sleeper, that he was heard to chuckle, as he clapped his jeweled hand upon his knee:

"He, he, he! Six chins, py golly! But dot 's w'at I call luggy! For fife year I haf peen looging for a laty mid six chins! Und now I got her midout no papers signed, und she don't know de walue of suberfluous chins in my pizness! He, he, he, he! A poy as can scratch his head mid his toes is not'ing to a laty mid six chins! Ho, ho, ho, ho!"

And Mr. Steinberger rubbed his hands together with glee. And then he pressed the electric button at his side.

"Anyhow I drink to de six chins," he chuckled. "I sign quick de papers as she shall shtand mit her poy on de blatform und den I shpring de chins."

LITTLE Steve wears a gilded crown. His diminutive body is gorgeously clad in jacket and breech-cloth of scarlet velveteen bedecked with tinsel fringe, and he sits upon a miniature throne in the Museum of the Golden Star; but Violet does not stand beside him.

It was thought best to make a new combination by which she soon found herself advertised as twin sister to a dashing chinless man from New Munster, who stood six feet seven in his boots and drew twenty dollars a week. Violet had chins enough for both. It was a case of love at first sight, and there was soon a real wedding. This romantic event was, of course, never mentioned in the bills when she and her complementary spouse were still announced as the "New Munster Twins," with explanatory notes giving the "true" sensational story of the confusion of chins through a pre-natal impression.

Steve was of age. Violet soon realized that there was no money in his contract for her, and she forthwith grew ashamed of him and disclaimed all relationship with him. And so when the little fellow was thrown in with a "job lot" of freaks who were sent to board with the "Living Mermaid," and Violet had taken to a furnished apartment—all Nottingham lace and cheap upholstery—just off the Bowery, she seemed to forget all about him. She had, by the way, learned somewhat of the value of extra chins in the meantime, and drew the opulent sum of five dollars a week apiece on all six.

When Mr. Steinberger had demurred at

this figure, she had threatened to tie the nether one inside her collar, and when still further provoked, what did she but with a quick puff seem to inflate the entire half-dozen until they were worth no more than a common goiter in the trade, which masterful exhibition of power and fire brought the manager to terms.

Subsequently, however, there arose out of her environment of admiration a resplendent suitor who proved a fatal rival to Violet's chinless mate,—a suitor from whom she could draw a royalty on chins kept at home,—and so there was a general rupture of museum contracts, and little Steve's mother, already gone quite out of his life, passed forever beyond his sight.

The first day that the boy missed her from her accustomed stand on the platform opposite his own, he could not have explained why, but his lip quivered just a little.

It is something when one is quite alone among strangers to be able to look over a sea of faces and simply to think, "There is my mother." If this be all, it is not much surely. Perhaps its full value was expressed in the slight momentary tremor of the boy's lip when he knew that she had gone.

But who shall say, when life is most hope-

less and barren, that such an atmosphere is poison, this or that flower a bane?

There be kind hearts in strange bosoms, and the "Living Mermaid" is a maternal creature and good to her boarders. Even the double-headed Chinaman, who is so disagreeable a sight to her that she seats him at meal-time at a table behind her, will tell you that both his mouths are generously fed. He will tell you this with both at once, indeed, not only behind her back, but behind his own, so it must be true.

Herself only a freak by courtesy, she regards with compassion all those who, when their hours of service are over, must needs fetch their superfluous members or their deficiencies home with them. She, of course, leaves the mermaid's caudal appendage in the tank and walks out from behind the curtain quite as other women, excepting, perhaps, more like rheumatic women than others, from the strained position of her limbs and the chill of the water.

Even more than all the other curios of her household, little Steve endears himself to her. She would probably care most for him simply because he is the one of lowest estate among them, and the loneliest, even had he

not little ways of devotion, as when for long hours at a time he is pleased simply to sit and rub her feet for her.

She does not drink or smoke or even swear in Steve's hearing, though the man of the house, who is not a merman, does all three.

Every second Sunday is her "day off" from tank duty, and on this afternoon, while Steve rubs her feet, she actually reads aloud a chapter in his Testament to him.

She has flowing crimson hair, and Steve thinks she is a goddess, especially when she gets her fins and tail on, and he could never conceive of anything more unfitting than that she should willingly do wrong.

Further than worshiping at the shrine of this most improper saint, who, under the undefined influence of his child-heart, shows him only her angel side, Steve will never go to the bad.

He enjoys his little throne, albeit it has, as other thrones, its weary hours.

He loves the music of the band, and is not yet able to refrain from giggling aloud when the fat women mount their bicycles.

He prides himself upon his scarlet coat and golden fringe. But to him, as to other

children, these things are simples with no secondary meanings or dangers.

Sometimes he falls asleep in his lofty seat and dreams of the plantation and "Mis' Annie," or of his boy companions, fancying himself flying from them, as he had often done, to an ambush of poison-oak, where they dare not follow him.

Rolling over and over in its luxuriant foliage in the old plantation days, he would gather the crimson leaves, which held no poison for him, and hurl them at his tormentors until his anger was spent, when he would fall asleep.

Old lady Trowland has long ago gone to her rest. Fortunately she never knew of Violet's meeting with Steve at the station, and a letter from the boy, following some time after Mr. Steinberger's prompt announcement of safe arrival, had assured her that he was well and happy.

The Mermaid had recognized sundry evidences of gentle rearing in this humblest of her boarders. She had great respect for old Mrs. Trowland, and this first letter, written with great pains, was her supreme effort.

Steve had wanted some poetry in the letter, but such verses as she suggested did not seem

to him to quite fit the case. He thought that a certain one that he called "Title Clair" would be very suitable, but unfortunately neither he nor his amanuensis could recall the words.

Although dazzled by the brilliant personality of the claret-colored divinity, Steve never hesitated, under provocation, to proclaim his first allegiance to the friend of his childhood, as in one instance, when the goddess had attempted to assert herself unduly, he startled her by springing to his feet and exclaiming:

"I 'll have you know Mis' Annie don't 'low nobody to impose on me! Don't keer ef you is belle o' de tank—*or whatever!*"

Whereupon the tender-hearted lady of fin fame, after gasping a moment in mute bewilderment, did forthwith don her gilt bonnet trimmed with a green parrot and solferino feathers, and sally forth down the street, whence she soon returned with a pink popcorn ball and a pair of campaign sleeve-buttons.

"Heer 's a bit of joolry for him, now, for makin' him mad it is," she says coaxingly, as she lays them in his hands; and the boy, crunching yesterday's reluctant confection,

as he laboriously adjusts a button, says presently:

"I see you walks tolerable limpy. Ef you wants yo' foots rubbed, you better set down an' take me whiles I 'm in de notion."

So peace is restored.

The wine-tinted goddess in the bestowal of her womanly sympathies unconsciously poses as a saint while she lends herself to the boy's innocent worship.

And he, stroking her great freckled foot with his little black hands, warms his own heart as well.

Again the poison-ivy is his friend. For little Steve's heart is the heart of a child.

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